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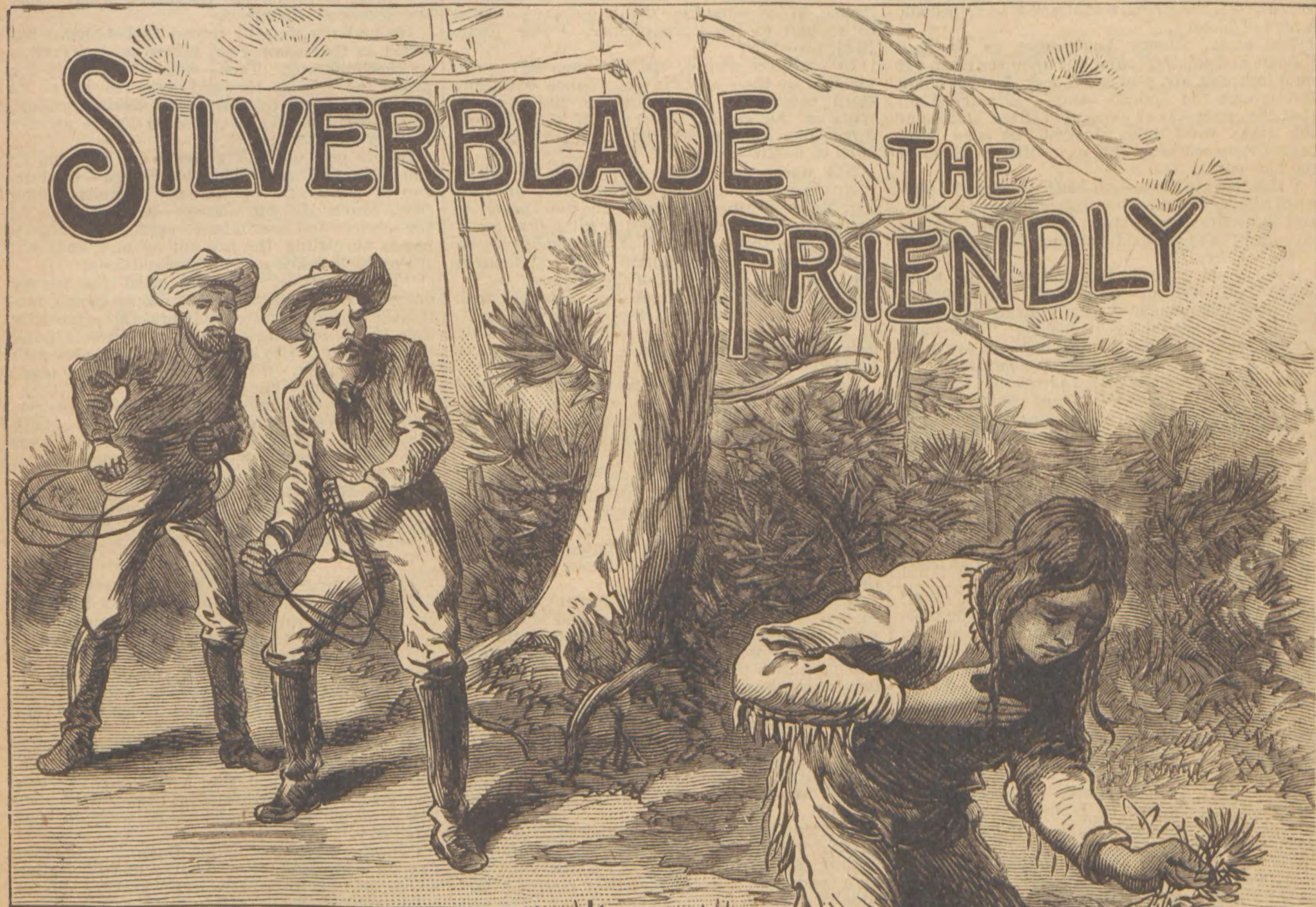
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OR,
THE BORDER BEAGLE'S BOY PARD.

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AUTHOR OF THE "SILVERBLADE" NOVELS, ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE TRAGEDY AT WOUNDED KNEE.

The night had passed quietly in the camp on Wounded Knee Creek, where rested the hostile Sioux under their chief, Big Foot. It was as though the ghost-dance had never been, and if there was no open rejoicing at the prospect of enduring peace, neither were there any signs of revolt or desperate treachery.

Beyond a doubt, they had come in and surrendered in good faith. It may be true that they believed the only alternative was extermination. A cordon of well-armed, well-mounted



TWO CROUCHING FIGURES STOLE NEARER, LARIATS IN HAND, SILVERBLADE WAS NOT ALONE WITH HIS DEAD!

soldiers barred them out of the Bad Lands, where alone they might hope to make a prolonged defense. The lines were being slowly but surely drawn in around them; Sitting Bull was dead; the long-promised advent of the Indian Messiah seemed further off than ever; their chief, Big Foot, was dangerously ill with pneumonia; and, while the weather had been unusually temperate for that region, all signs pointed to a sharp and disastrous change at an early day.

Outwardly, then, the camp seemed peaceful enough, but under that calm surface lay all the elements of death and destruction; like a powder-magazine, they needed but a spark to turn all to ruin.

It was with Big Foot's band that the survivors of Sitting Bull's immediate command had sought refuge, and knowing how bitterly green the Seventh Cavalry had kept the memory of the Little Big Horn through all those fifteen years, one can hardly marvel at their sleeplessness that night, knowing as they did that the coming day would bring them under the guns of those revengeful soldiers, for the first time since Custer died.

Would they be treated as men of to-day, or would an attempt be made to avenge Yellow Hair? Only for those haunting doubts, Wounded Knee Creek would never have become a part of history.

The clear, silvery bugle-notes as the call "Boots and saddle!" rung out upon the crisp yet mild morning air, sent a no less decided thrill throughout the Indian camp. It warned all that the crisis was at hand, and if the actions of the Sioux were more sluggish, be sure their brains were working full as swiftly as those of the blue-coats.

"It is bad medicine—all bad!" muttered a stalwart Sioux, wearing the war-plumes of a chief, and the scars of a warrior, a sullen fire coming into his eyes as he stood watching the movements of the soldiers.

"We must turn it to good medicine, then, chief," muttered his immediate companion, a tall, lithe-built youth of mixed blood, who could hardly have passed his majority. "We have broken their laws, but the penalty will not be so heavy, if we give up our guns, peacefully."

The ghost of a sneer flitted across that strongly marked face as the chief turned partly toward the speaker, but there was more of scorn in the words than in his tones as Thunder Strike made reply:

"Silverblade is a Shoshone, and half white. This is his first war-path. Thunder Strike is a Brule Sioux, and he was with Chief Gall when the Yellow Hair died. Now—their knives are long, but their memory is still longer!"

Silverblade gripped an arm, speaking swiftly, earnestly:

"Cover your memory with a blanket, chief! Big Foot is head chief here; let him do the talking. If we are asked for our guns, give them up. We can get more, when we need them. But if you are killed, what will become of Little Bird?"

The grim old warrior gave an impatient shrug, but at the same time his eyes shot a glance toward one of those skin tepees, where the slightly disturbed door-flap gave him an indistinct glimpse of a comely young face; the face of his only daughter, Little Bird.

Only for her, Thunder Strike would never have surrendered. Sooner or later he must have fallen, but death would have found him with arms in his hands, and the war-cry on his lips.

But now—a snake seemed coiling about his neck, and as one hand instinctively flew up to his throat, it seemed as though his fingers touched the nose of the hangman!

The veterans of the Seventh quickly took up their stations in obedience to the commands given by their officers, and it may well be doubted whether any one member of the regiment even suspected what an awful tragedy was so soon to be enacted.

By this time, too, the Indian camp was fairly awokened, and though many of the skin lodges still retained their owners, bucks as well as squaws and papoosees, few indeed were the eyes otherwise occupied than in watching the grimly methodical movements of the still hated Long-knives.

The troopers were being drawn up in line of battle, one hundred yards distant from those grimy, dilapidated lodges, with Company K, under command of Captain Wallace, in the front.

Beyond these soldiers yet another hundred yards, a battery of Hotchkiss guns were being placed in position on the crest of a butte which commanded the lower level on which the Sioux had pitched camp. And as the Indians saw

how those grim, death-splitting muzzles were being trained upon them, dark and darker grew their scowls of doubt and hatred.

Was it so strange that more than one savage memory turned backward more than a generation, to that bloody day in 1859, at Soda Springs, Idaho, when General Hardy forever broke the power of the Bannocks, as a tribe?

Big Foot, too weak from illness to stand erect, crawled out of his tepee while these maneuvers were taking place, making the signal of peace with his unsteady hand. And then, in twos and threes, the Sioux warriors gathered in the clear space before their lodges, squatting in a slowly growing semicircle, their forms shrouded in heavy blankets, their faces sullen, their eyes half-anxious, half-menacing as they watched the movements of their hereditary foes.

When all was in position, Major Whitesides, through an interpreter, made a formal demand for the surrender of the Sioux band.

Big Foot made a gesture of submission, and a low, sullen grunt of assent went around that half-circle.

Then, still speaking through the interpreter, a demand was made for the surrender of all guns and side-arms possessed by the Sioux.

"Come," whispered Silverblade, to Thunder Strike, at the same time firmly gripping an arm as though to force compliance. "For Little Bird, father!"

In ominous silence, the two men advanced, yielding up their arms in accordance with that stern command. And, leaving the weapons lying on the ground in front of the soldiers, Silverblade and Thunder Strike silently stepped back to await—what?

Not another warrior attempted to follow their example, and after a brief period of waiting, Major Whitesides caused the interpreter to repeat his command, in slightly altered terms.

Counting from one end of the semicircle, he told off twenty of the Indians, ordering them to lay their arms at the feet of the soldiers.

A few moments of breathless suspense: then those selected arose and stepped forward, with at least a show of obedience. They gave up two rifles: one without a lock, the other thickly incrusted with rust!

As Major Whitesides witnessed this farcical result of his orders, he lost his temper, sternly ordering the sullen braves back to their places, speaking to his interpreter as the Indians sullenly obeyed:

"Make the red rascals understand that we're not here to play a farce. Tell them that each buck has got to show up at least one good gun, or pay the penalty!"

Then, turning to the dismounted cavalry, he ordered Troops A and K to advance and search the tepees for arms.

Led by Captain Wallace, Company K began to search the lodges for rifles and side-arms, while Company A moved to surround the Indians, who were excitedly rising to their feet, passing guttural words from lip to lip, evidently fearing the worst.

The search had hardly begun, when one of the Sioux—a crack-brained young fellow, only a short time from one of the Indian schools—gave a wild cry, scooping up a handful of dirt and casting it at the nearest soldier.

That was the spark! Then the magazine exploded!

As a single man those one hundred and sixty bucks dropped their blankets to the ground, revealing the rifles and revolvers which had thus been concealed. As one man they poured a terrible volley into the cavalrymen, some of whom were so close that the rifle-muzzles actually touched their bodies as the weapons exploded.

Click! click! the ejectors were flung forward, then back, casting out the empty shell and inserting a fresh cartridge, followed with fearful rapidity by a second volley; and all this before a shot was fired or a blow struck by the briefly bewildered soldiers!

The destruction was awful. Some of the troopers fell at the tepees which they had not yet had time to enter. Others filled the space between the actual combatants and the other soldiers, who were hastily preparing to come to the relief of their comrades.

For two or three minutes, which they fearfully employed, the Indians were masters of the field, already thickly strewn with the harvest of the grim reaper.

Troops K and A wavered before the desperate onslaught, then fell back in disorder, such as never before marred the record of the "Super Seventh."

Contrary to all traditional methods of Indian warfare, that handful of fanatical red-skins

fought with fiendish ferocity and matchless audacity.

They were but one hundred and sixty against five hundred of the best and hardest fighters of our army, backed up by improved machine guns, and commanded by veteran officers. They must have known they were doomed to die, there and then, but it seemed to be the fixed purpose of each brave to die fighting.

There was no flight on their part after the first volley had been delivered. With the awful war-cry of their tribe, the savages pressed forward against the remnants of the two shattered troops. Not a commissioned officer of Company K was left upon his feet. And poor Captain Wallace lay dead in the entrance to a tepee, a rifle-ball in his brain, and his skull shattered by a stone war-club, the last wielded by the sinewy arm of a Brule squaw!

Scattered all about the brave captain were his men, many of them dead, but others groaning with the pain which their wounds gave them.

All this took place with bewildering rapidity, and even some of those who had slept but little through the night last passed, were so completely surprised that the tragedy was under full headway before they could fully realize what was coming.

Among these may be numbered Silverblade, the Shoshone half-blood.

He had not time to return to his former position in that semicircle, before it was broken by that uprising. Then—with a sharp cry for peace, he sprung forward, only to have his words drowned by that death-dealing volley, and himself nearly overthrown by the swiftly moving Sioux warriors.

Before he could fairly regain his balance, he caught a glimpse of Thunder Strike—the burden of years and unnumbered wounds falling from him as did his blanket—leap upon one of the soldiers and bear him to earth, with sinewy hands throttling the life out of him, and still strong teeth tearing at his exposed face!

"Peace! peace!" hoarsely cried the nearly crazed youth, flinging up his empty hands, facing the terribly excited soldiers who were only kept from mowing down that fanatical band through fear of slaying their own comrades with the same volley. "Have pity! They are mad! They know not what they do!"

As he pressed upon the maddened savages, trying to reach Thunder Strike, to save both him and the soldier, one Sioux blindly thrust his rifle against the youth, but Silverblade struck it aside just before the explosion, and then—

From whence it came, or what shape it took, he never knew, but something struck Silverblade on the head, and he fell like one slain!

CHAPTER II.

A DESPERATE DASH FOR LIFE.

FOR a brief space it actually seemed as though the Indians were fated to add yet another sanguinary victory to their already long record of pitiless massacres, favored as they were by the unfortunate distribution of troops. Only for that, the first blow would have been the last, and the fanatical Sioux would have fallen in the very act of dealing it.

As it was, the recoil came almost as suddenly as had that treacherous onslaught, and the fortune of war so willed that it was men of their own color who turned the first page in that grim lesson which the Sioux were to learn on that fated day.

Captain Taylor, of Ninth Cavalry, but that day in command of a detachment of Indian scouts, had his force between the hostiles and the main body of troops, and in order to keep them from being confounded with the enemy, he ordered the scouts to fall flat to the ground, himself setting the example.

A stronger test of loyalty to race was never offered, but without a single exception the Indian scouts proved true to their cloth, hardly waiting for the word before pouring a deadly volley into that writhing mass of fanatical hostiles.

Hardly five minutes elapsed between the crazy yell which set the Sioux to slaying, and the opening chorus of the machine guns, but it was during this brief interval that the whites suffered by far the heaviest proportion of their serious loss.

The troopers charged down the slope to the depression in the ground where the camp of Big Foot had been pitched, some firing as they came, others flashing forth their heavy sabers, all uniting in a deep, hoarse yell for vengeance, not alone for the comrades then being slaughtered, but for those gallant boys who rode to death behind George Custer nearly fifteen long years before this beautiful morning.

The soldier fought regardless of the age or sex of their foe. The Indians were as demons in their delirium to kill before dying. And so the white skin and the red came together in a hand-to-hand fight so recklessly desperate that its parallel cannot be found in the red annals of Indian warfare.

When Custer died with his gallant three hundred, powder and lead rolled up the awful score, but here—it was hand-to-hand, breast-to-breast, life for life!

Through the smoke which hung over the lodges and obscured the "draw," the Seventh dashed upon the howling, screeching savages, to be met with rifles, pistols, war-clubs and knives. The ground was already thickly strewn with dead and wounded, both red and white. Fleeing in every direction were the squaws and children, making for the low hills and intervening gulches, where death might be cheated, at least for a time.

Early in the action several of the greasy lodges had caught fire, by accident or intentionally, and the blinding smoke helped materially to increase the confusion which reigned throughout during those first few minutes. Nor was this lessened by the stampeding of the hundreds of ponies which had been brought in by the surrounding hostiles. Here and there the bewildered creatures dashed, throwing both masters and foemen into confusion as they forced a passage.

It was during this fierce fighting that Lieut. Garlington, who had taken a conspicuous part in the battle up to that moment, fell wounded from his horse. Believing him slain, the "Gray Horse Squadron," of which he was commander, closed in about a group of Sioux near the fallen officer, slaying them to a unit.

The masterly work of the Seventh soon told the tale. Within half an hour two-thirds of the hostile force lay dead or disabled. Among that number was Big Foot himself, his broad breast riddled with bullets.

The remnant of the band, losing part of their fanatical frenzy as death began to recoil upon their own heads, broke away for the gulches hard by, and thus gave the machine guns, posted on the butte to the south of the bloody field, a chance to do their part of the work. Up to that moment the gunners had been compelled to stand idle, though under a heavy fire from the Sioux, lest they harm their own people more than the red-skinned, so closely were the two races locked in that fierce death grapple.

But now the guns could be worked, and their noisy rattle was added to the grim uproar.

The crest of the butte was enveloped in smoke, from the center of which flashed two streams of fire, moving slowly to the east and west, then back again, as their muzzles were shifted to cover more space.

Bullets scored the low hills and whistled through the draws in a merciless shower, braves, squaws and papooses going down in death before its withering breath. There was no discrimination, simply because there could be none.

With smoke from the burning lodges, and smoke from the guns, blending together in a blue vail, no man could tell squaw from buck as both fled in the same direction, either afoot or mounted on some of the stampeding ponies. For squaws were dressed much like the bucks, and those who were mounted rode astride.

Through ravines and into the red-willow brush poured the bullets from the machine guns, until the slopes and hillsides were dotted with dead braves, squaws, and even children.

Those who were not checked by the Hotchkiss guns, were chased and run down by the troops under Colonel Forsythe and Lieutenant Rice, Robinson and O'Hare.

Two hours after the first shot was fired, the soldiers were masters of the field, but it had been won at a fearful cost. Killed or wounded, between seventy and eighty soldiers lay as they had fallen, while more than one hundred and fifty of the Sioux were slain.

Silverblade, the Shoshone, fell like one killed, but the shock was short-lasting, and almost before the soldiers rallied from that first fierce assault, the youth lifted his head, to stare dizzily around.

He caught a glimpse of Thunder Strike, now upon his feet, and in the act of braining a trooper, who was thrusting a revolver toward that broad, battle-scarred chest. Stroke and shot came simultaneously, and even as the Shoshone rose, the Brule went down in death!

Blending with those awful sounds, came a shrill, anguished shriek, and Silverblade caught sight of Little Bird struggling toward the fallen chief, heedless of her own life in the vain hope

of preserving his. And that sight brought back his bodily and mental powers, as perhaps nothing else could have done, just then.

"Little Bird! here!" he cried, hurling aside with his empty hands two of the Sioux who intervened.

Just how it was done, he never could explain, but Silverblade, who saw the Indian girl flinch, reel and stagger as though badly hurt, made out not only to gain her side, but to pick her up bodily and force a way through that writhing, fighting, dying mass of humanity.

It was a terrible struggle, and had it lasted minutes in place of seconds, both boy and girl surely must have gone down in death before that maddened mass was cleared.

As it was, Silverblade hardly knew how the victory was won, until it was over, and he found himself springing up behind Little Bird, whom he had lifted into a cavalry saddle. And then a rush of the stampeding ponies carried them away from that pit of death, toward the low hills and intervening gulches lying north of the camping-ground.

Silverblade heard the vicious humming of lead as he rode on, and thinking only of Little Bird's safety, he forced the bewildered girl to lie forward along the horse's withers, lowering his own lithe trunk the better to cover her form.

It took less than a minute to cover the space between camp and cover, but during that brief interval of time, death made a score efforts to claim them both as his prey.

The machine guns were talking, now, and the double stream of bullets were tearing up the ground and scattering the stones, just as a heavy storm of hail will scatter the thick-lying ashes of a dead fire.

Behind, in front, to either hands Indians were dying, caught by that awful storm. Once, as their horse blindly plunged into a hollow, Silverblade felt the shifting hail of bullets fairly lifting his long, uncovered hair as he lay close along the back of Little Bird; but the range had shifted to the left as they struggled out of the shallow pit, to plunge into one of the partially sheltered gulches.

But then, just when safety seemed assured, Little Bird gave a convulsive start, and Silverblade heard her gasp in agony. Careless for himself, he rose up, crying aloud words which even his own ears failed to catch in that hideous tumult. But his hands were dyed redder than by nature in the warm blood of the Indian girl who had promised to become his wife!

His hands were busy with keeping Little Bird from falling to the ground, and the unguided horse dashed along at break-neck speed, following the gulch until it gradually blended with the more level tract of ground beyond those low hills.

Silverblade could hear the hoarse cheers of the cavalry as they charged the fleeing savages, and though he cared little for his own life, just then, he pressed on and on, thinking solely of saving Little Bird from falling into those pitiless hands.

He believed death had claimed her, for not a sound had passed her lips since that one gasping moan, and she lay a limp, nerveless weight upon his hands. He could see the red blood staining her fawnskin jacket, and felt it trickling down his own leg, wetting through the smoke-tanned buckskin.

On, still on, until the sound of battle dulled behind him, and those vengeful shouts could no longer be heard. Then Silverblade reached forward after the loose-lying reins, quickly bringing the horse to a halt, under a little clump of pines.

He slipped to the ground, gently supporting that nerveless form, holding it across one arm while mechanically tying the horse to one of the trees. Then—a gasping cry parted his lips, for he felt Little Bird move in his arms, and saw her heavy lids trembling as her eyes opened!

"Thank God!" he panted, in English, for the time being forgetting his vow to be "red, all red!" "You are alive, Little Bird! Say that you are not hurt—not badly hurt?"

A faint smile came into that dusky face, seeming more comely than ever, now that the finger of death was imprinting his seal thereon.

"Lay me down, Silverblade," she faintly murmured, her eyes closing after that long, yearning look into his anxious face. "Little Bird is dying! It is here—Little Bird's heart!"

Silverblade gently lowered her form to the ground, doing what he could to save her life; but from his first glance at that cruel wound he knew there was no earthly hope. Death was but a question of minutes, and though he strove to check the bleeding, it was more to still his

own conscience than in hopes of delaying the end.

"No use," faintly smiled Little Bird, lifting her lids to gaze wistfully into the face she had learned to love so passionately. "It is death. Better so maybe. Better—for Silverblade!"

"You will live—you must live, for me, Little Bird!"

"No—die for you," smiled the girl. "If live, you stay—be all red, all Indian! Little Bird die—go back home—be white—all white! Better so—much better so!"

Silverblade tried to change the current of her thoughts, but vainly. The coming of death seemed to clear her eyes, and brush away the last lingering mists of superstition. And then, with gasps of pain breaking her sentences, Little Bird proved herself a true woman; for she begged that the man she loved might think only of himself, and of his future.

"It was wrong—all wrong, son of Weenamoo," she murmured. "There is only one God—only one Messiah! And He preached peace, not war! It was all wrong, my poor brave! Sweep to do what you can to bring it all right, again!"

Silverblade strove to answer, but a swelling in his throat forbade. And there came a thick mist before his eyes which almost shut out that dusky face as it grew paler before the coming of death.

He knew, vaguely, indistinctly, that Little Bird was begging him to turn his back forever upon war; to go back to his people; to preach the gospel of peace, never more to take up the weapons of war.

And then—the end came, quietly, peacefully.

CHAPTER III.

A BRACE OF FACETIOUS COWBOYS.

THROUGH those last few minutes, as well as the hours which followed, Silverblade, the half-blood Shoshone, acted like one living, moving in a waking dream.

He knew that Little Bird, before that last faint gasp, urged him to return to his people without delay, there to bury the past beyond all resurrection. He knew that she told him to forget her; that she knew, now that the hand of death was clearing her eyes of dust, he had never loved her as she had loved him; that her death was best, since now he would be free to work out a destiny befitting one of his talents.

He knew that he had tried to check her self-wounding words, but in vain. Little Bird loved him so wholly that she cared only to open his eyes, regardless how the truth tore her own fond heart.

He knew that, when the damp of death was moistening her brow, Little Bird faintly asked him to kiss her. And that touch of her cold lips still chilled him, hours after!

Like one in a dream, he had wrapped the dead girl up in a blanket which he found rolled up and strapped behind the cavalry saddle. And, still like one in a dream, he had mounted the horse and ridden away toward the north, with Little Bird lying in his arms.

He had ridden without aim, without thought, almost, through the remaining hours of that memorable day, only coming to a halt when the shades of night began to deepen over the earth.

He tethered the horse he had appropriated, and then built a low hut of pine boughs over that shrouded form. He kindled a fire and squatted down beside it, but in this, as in all else, he was acting through pure instinct. His brain was under a cloud. His actions were those of a man who might be said to be in a trance, or a somnambulistic sleep.

Yes, as he crouched there over the little fire through that long night, his brain was active, after a certain fashion, for it brought in review before him all the more prominent events of his young life.

He was the son of Luke Woodbridge, a prosperous settler and stock-grower, near the upper line of North Dakota. His mother, lawfully wedded, was Weenamoo, a full-blood Shoshone, or Snake woman. And it was from her that David Woodbridge had received the name of Silverblade; from her that he took his wild, mystical nature: from her lips that he had received the first teachings which, when the gospel of the Indian Messiah first came to be preached, ended in his breaking away from his father, his sister, his schooling at Carlisle, to embrace the new religion, and become one of the most fanatical of the ghost-dancers gathered together by Sitting Bull, high priest and medicine-man of the Sioux.

Silverblade had been converted to the "new

religion" by one of the numerous emissaries dispatched by Sitting Bull to win other tribes to join him in the great war against the whites. This particular emissary, who was counted upon to interest the Shoshones, the Grosventres, the Crees and Bannocks of the north, failed to win them over, so far as open rebellion was concerned, but Silverblade joined Sitting Bull, and was with him when the Indian Police, led by Bull Head, killed the medicine-man while resisting arrest. And Silverblade was one of those who broke away from Standing Rock Agency, in an attempt to reach the Bad Lands, where they might make a protracted fight, if nothing better.

While on their way to this traditional refuge, strange events had transpired through which the half-blood was led to see how completely he had been duped by designing knaves, and it was partly through his eloquence that the Sioux, under Thunder Strike, had been led to turn back with the avowed purpose of surrendering to the soldiers. While on their return, they had fallen in with the band under Big Foot, and so Silverblade came to play a minor part in the tragedy at Wounded Knee.

Then his thoughts turned more closely toward Little Bird, over whose corpse he was then holding vigil.

She had nursed him back to life, after his severe wound received when Sitting Bull was slain. In so doing, the poor girl had lost her heart to her patient, and realizing this, Silverblade, while heart-sick and broken-spirited over his disillusionment, vowed to make her his wife as soon as possible, that they might the better aid each other in enlightening the Indians, and bringing them back to the "white man's road," through which alone the race might hope to reach peace and contentment.

Now—Little Bird was dead!

And Silverblade inwardly cursed his insensibility, because he could not feel still deeper grief, because he knew, deep down in his heart, that this death was better for him than life on her part could have been!

"It is better so," Little Bird had murmured, just before her death. "The words only came from your lips, not from your heart. You are all white, not all red—not even part red! Little Bird loved her young brave, and hoped to live for him, even as he would live for her; but it was a lying song! Silverblade never loved his—sister! It is well that she dies, for now Silverblade can love her memory. If Little Bird had lived, she would have been hated!"

There lay the keenest sting, for the half-blood knew that her words were surely based on truth! And the stouter he fought against it, the stronger grew his conviction, though it caused his head to droop lower, and his lithe form to shiver with bitter shame.

Throughout that long night Silverblade retained that humiliated attitude, only altering it long enough to add fuel to the fire as it grew low. He dared not cast a glance toward that low heap of pine boughs, lest the form of Little Bird rise up to accuse him of worse than treachery. And yet—and yet—

He surely had acted as he thought the best at the time. Would he act differently now? Were his eyes opened to the truth? What was the truth? What could he believe, since even the Indian Messiah had proved false?

And so, his weary brain going round and round, over the same ground, vainly seeking for light, the young Shoshone lived out that weary night, and never knew that the gray light of another day was stealing over the earth, never heard the suspicious stamping of his captured horse, never caught the faint sounds of those stealthy steps, as two crouching figures stole nearer, lariats in hand, noosed and whirling for a cast!

With barely the difference of a single second those two loops were shot forward, the first one tightening around the half-blood's chest, and pinning both arms to his side as he gave an instinctive start. But before he could do more, the second noose dropped over his head, and the two lariats held Silverblade powerless as their wielders sprung still further apart, vigorously hauling upon their effective weapons.

"Whoa-up, critter!" cried out one of the ropers, giving a vicious jerk that would surely have upset the half-blood, had it not been counteracted by a similar demonstration on the part of the second cowboy. "Stiddy does it! Try to pitch or buck, an' down ye go to eat dirt!"

"A maverick, sure, pard!" recklessly laughed his mate, playing his part with the rope as only an old hand can. "Thar's the fire, hyar's the critter, now—whar's the brandin'-iron?"

Taken completely by surprise, and at such a

terrible disadvantage, Silverblade was helpless, yet animal instinct caused him to struggle, though he could hardly be said to comprehend his peril.

He sprung forward in vague hopes of slackening that double strain long enough to enable him to slip at least one arm free, but this move was easily foiled by the two cowboys, who deftly flung the captive to earth, then closed in on him before he could even attempt to rise.

Working in swift concert, hardly a score of seconds passed before Silverblade was securely bound with one of the lariats, and then his captors drew back, laughing easily at his futile struggles.

"What'll we do 'ith the critter, now we've got 'im roped, Jerry?"

"Peel his pelt a-kickin', I reckon, fer not makin' mighty sight more fun when he hed the chaceine!" replied his mate, with real or assumed ferocity, scowling blackly upon their helpless prisoner. "Him a maverick? Don't you b'lieve it, Tom Dustin! He's a scrub from a city barn, come out hyar fer a smell at the ginewine—Hollow!"

As though he had just then caught sight of that low, narrow mound of pine boughs, the cowboy sprung forward with ruthless hand, only to start back with another sharp ejaculation as that cold, dead face was exposed to view.

"A Injun gal! An'—murdered, by glory!"

"Back, ye hounds!" hoarsely cried Silverblade, struggling against his bonds as he saw those two rough fellows bending over his dead. "Touch her not, or I'll— Back, ye devils!"

His breath was wasted. The boughs were cleared away sufficiently to show the wound through which life had ebbed. Then, their weatherbeaten faces preternaturally grave, the cowboys drew back, their eyes meeting.

"Done shot, Jerry Black!"

"Mighty right, Tom Dustin!"

"She's Injun, pard, but she was a gal. Somebody shot her. Who?"

"Waal, thar's only three o' us in range, an' I cain't make it come right that you nur me done the job, pardner. She's only Injun, but I do reckon we could 'a' putt her to heap sight better use'n that! So—what made ye do it, critter?" turning with a grim scowl toward the half-blood. "What made ye plug the squaw that-a-way, dug-gun ye?"

Half-sullenly Silverblade offered his denial, and then, as those menacing scowls only seemed to deepen, he told the whole truth in few words: that Little Bird had been shot by the soldiers as they broke away from the massacre on Wounded Knee Creek.

When his brief explanation came to an end, the cowboy interchanged glances. Tom Dustin seemed puzzled, but not so Jerry Black, his mate.

"I like a liar, but he suits me too mighty well!" the red-haired cowboy declared, giving his cartridge-studded belt a bitch as he spoke. "We hain't got time to go huntin' up ary court o' law, hev we, pard?"

"Sea'cely, Jerry! An' then—she's jest a Injun, pard! Sech truck don't come high 'nough fer to ketch the eye of a reg'lar jedge, do they, even ef we knowed whar to round one up?"

"Not as a rule, pard," with a solemn wag of his head, which did double duty by helping his teeth twist a fragment of tobacco from a heavy plug. "But—he's a red, too, don't ye reckon?"

Dustin advanced and bent over their captive, examining his face and hair with exaggerated care, then drew erect to make reply:

"Ef he ain't, then his dam or his sire made a mighty mistake, pard!"

"I reckon. Then, bein's he's Injun, an' the gal he shot was Injun, while you'd me's both clean white, Tom Dustin, what part o' the rules an' reg'lations, made an' pervised, fits in right hyar? What does the Good Book say? 'Ef a critter shoots a gal, plug him on the fu'st spot ye kin ketch him at!' What does the law say? 'Pelt for pelt, an' the Skinner gits the taller!' What does common gumption say? 'When ye see a good thing, freeze both hooks onto it afore it kin git away!'"

"I reckon you're mighty nigh right, Jerry, but ef ye know what ye're tryin' to git through ye, billy-be-jo-hammered ef I do!" grunted Tom Dustin, scratching the back of his head with a puzzled demeanor.

"Tain't every man that kin be borned a lawyer, pardner, which comes in mighty lucky right hyar," gravely nodded Black. "That means, I'm to be jedge, while you're jury. Live Injun's the prisoner, dead Injun gal's the witness an' the evidence, all two in one lump! So—stiddy, jury! Toes to the front, chin up an' eyes p'intin' at the jedge! Stiddy!"

"All sot, jedge, an' we, us, an' me too, find

the prisoner guilty o' murderin' the Injun gal witness, an' tharfore we—"

"Whoa-up, jury!" cried the judge, flinging aloft his hands by way of added emphasis. "You cain't find a critter guilty afore hearin' the proof ag'in' him!"

"This jury kin!" grimly interposed that may-in-one. "What's the odds? He's Injun, hain't he?"

"I reckon, but—"

"Then whar's the use o' chawin' more air? He's natur'bound fer to be guilty o' all that's brung up ag'in' him, an' a mighty sight more too! An' so—guilty, jedge! An' the jury he fu'st shot!"

Dustin wheeled, hand on pistol, but Jerry Black swiftly gripped his hand, hastily explaining:

"That's too old, pardner! Shootin' is! An' then—tain't the way reg'lar courts do, anyhow. Cain't ye see?"

"They sponge off the slate, an' 'gree to a new trial, but we hain't got time fer to waste in seck pesky foolishin'. Let go my gun, pardner, and see how slick I kin set the left eye o' Injun!"

CHAPTER IV.

THE BORDER BEAGLE SPOILS SPORT.

THROUGH all this hastily-contrived farce, Silverblade lay in silence, knowing that he could not burst or slip his bonds. He had offered his only possible defense when questioned, but now he was almost sorry that he had taken even so much trouble.

Since his faith in the coming of the Indian Messiah had been so ruthlessly shattered, life had hardly seemed worth the living. He had given his whole soul to that fanatical belief, and when that faith was torn away, his spirit seemed taken with it.

Until Little Bird died, he felt that at least one tie bound him to earth, and he would have lived, if only for her sake. But now—he even smiled faintly as he watched those two reckless cowboys disputing—not for his life, but over the manner in which he should die!

"I reckon you could blot it out, an' not haftry, pardner," soothingly admitted Jerry Black, but still maintaining his grip on pistol and on wrist. "But even so, whar'd be the fun? Jest a crack, a kick, an' a roll over! Fer me—waal, I've shot more'n one Injun, not to say white, but I never yit hed the lawful hangin' of ary one o' the two breeds!"

"Reckon it'd be more fun, pardner?" doubtfully asked Dustin, but with a change of face at that deft suggestion. "Kick a heap sight, ye reckon?"

"Kick ontel ye cain't rest!" gravely asserted his mate, with a vigorous nodding of the head. "Kick, an' squirm, an' try fer to tie his both laigs 'round his neck, an'—jest pilin' up more fun in a minnit then you could git over laughin' at inside o' six months, pard!"

"Honest Injun, pard!"

"Cross my heart ef I'm even thinkin' a lie, pard!"

"I'll do the crossin' with a chunk o' lead ef she don't pan out jest so, understand?"

"It's a whack! Fetch up his critter, pard, an' I'll rig the purchase, law-fashion," chuckled Black, picking up and coiling the discarded lariat while glancing upward in quest of a suitable limb.

That was not difficult to find, and a deft cast sent the noosed end over a stout bough, to be caught by the amateur hangman, who clung to the doubled rope and tested the limb with his own weight.

"I say, pardner!" spoke Dustin, as he led forward the horse which had carried a double burden away from Wounded Knee. "Mebbe the dug-gun critter wasn't plum' lyin', after all, fer—see the U. S. brand?"

"Then he wants fer to be hung 'long o' stealin' Gov'ment prop'ty," came the cool retort.

"An' even ef thar wasn't sech a fresh charge to lug in ag'in' the critter, this hyar court don't make no mistakes. One time o' sayin' makes the law, ef they hain't none thar afore it. An' hevin' found the pris'ner guilty, an' hevin' sentenced him to be roped, the circus goes right on, regardless!"

"Waal, I ain't a-kickin'. Ef the critter hain't done nothin' to desarve hangin' fer, I reckon he would in time, ef we give him slack enough. So, hyar's yer hangin'-machine, pardner!"

Laughing, jesting, acting as though they held the life of an Indian at even less value than that of a mangy cur, the cowboys hastened their preparations for the grim ending to their clumsy farce.

The half-blood's arms were tightly bound be-

hind his back, and then the lasso was uncoiled from about his body. Strong hands lifted him into the saddle, Dustin holding him steady while Black fitted the dangling noose about his neck, then drawing back to fasten the free end of the lariat around the tree-trunk.

"Don't be in sech a mighty rush, pard!" called out Dustin, standing in front of the horse, a broad grin on his weather-marred face. "Durn a hangin' whar they hain't no dyin' speech an' last confession! Spit 'or out, critter!" with a vigorous nod toward Silverblade. "Fess all how you butchered the squaw, an' why ye did it. Come 'long o' her battin' the two eyes o' her at a han'somer feller, wasn't it?"

Never a word spoke the half-blood. Though he surely must have felt that the shadow of a cruel death was stealing over him, not a muscle quivered, not a feature changed. He stared straight ahead, but he saw nothing. If all white, feeling as he did, he would have hastened the end by bitter words. Being half an Indian, he stoically waited.

"Cain't ye see he's too mighty bashful fer chin-music, pardner?" laughed Jerry Black, still standing with the loose end in his hands while waiting on the whim of his mate. "'Fess you, an' I reckon the buck'll be willin' to sw'ar to it all!"

Whether or no Tom Dustin would have acted on this hint, can never be decided with any certainty, for just then a clear, stern voice cried aloud:

"All hands up and empty, both o' you! I've got you lined, and I never learned how to miss! Up, I say, or lie down for keeps!"

With the first word an athletic figure sprung from behind a scrubby bush, and stood within a score yards of the astonished cowboys, a revolver in each hand, and two brown eyes flashing keenly over the leveled tubes of death.

His position was such that he commanded both cowboys, and if he was anything like the artist he claimed to be with the revolver, he could easily shoot down both men before they could hope to draw and fire.

Tom Dustin saw this, and stood without motion save that required to send both hands up above his head, but Jerry Black was blinder, or made of sterner stuff, for he dropped the rope to snatch a pistol from its scabbard, and then—

A single shot rang out, and the cowboy dropped his gun, with an involuntary howl of mingled pain and rage, blood flying from his bullet-scored knuckles.

"Steady, I say!" sharply repeated the newcomer. "Try that trick over, and I'll drill a hole through your thick skull, big enough to let brains out, if sense can't work in! Hands up, for the last time!"

"You've crippled me!" snarled Black, but lifting both hands.

"Give thanks that I didn't kill you. Silverblade?"

"Brother—Big Horn!" ejaculated the half-blood, something like the old animation springing into his thin visage.

"Your feet are free. The *riata* will slip from over the limb. Get down and come over here. And you, my pretty lads, hold steady, or there'll be meat for a double funeral, done up in your clothes!"

The young Shoshone obeyed, slipping from the saddle and moving to one side, in order not to for even an instant place his body as a shield between either of the cowboys and those leveled weapons. The pliant lariat slipped over the limb, falling to the frozen earth, then dragging after the half-blood as he approached his rescuer.

The new-comer lowered his left hand, placing its weapon in his belt, but keeping his right hand ready to deal out death to the cowboys should they attempt to turn the tables. And then, guiding his keen knife by the sense of touch alone, he quickly severed the bonds which confined Silverblade's arms behind his back.

"Good enough, and better coming!" he cried, with a low, mocking laugh, as he gave the knife to the half-blood, once more drawing a pistol with his left hand. "Go borrow their tools, Davie, lad! Such tenderfeet are really unfit to be trusted with such manly weapons!"

It was a bitter pill to swallow, but there was a steely glitter in those keen brown eyes which warned the cowboys not to risk too much to that smiling face, and neither one gave the half-blood any trouble while he was depriving them of their belts and weapons.

"Lie down, both of you, flat on your faces!" sternly ordered Big Horn, as the half-blood had called the latest comer. "Not a whimper!" as Jerry Black began to mumble, shaking the blood from his injured hand. "Lie down or—So!"

A deft trip with a foot hastened the maneuver, and another brisk touch or two made sure that each fellow was stretched out flat on his stomach. Then, in cold, harsh tones Big Horn spoke again:

"What have you two rascals to offer against my hanging you, even as you mean to hang this young man?"

"He's jest a Injun!" growled Tom Dustin.

"Just an Indian!" echoed Big Horn, his eyes almost flashing fire as he spoke. "And you offer that as an excuse for your brutality? You think his color excuses you from attempted murder? Why, you infernal curs! Indian as he may be, he is white as snow in comparison with you! He is like an angel of light against twin devils from the deepest pits of Tophet! He is—"

"Brother?" came a low, musical voice, and Big Horn turned to meet the grave, sad eyes of the half-blood.

"Not now, lad," shaking off that touch, though his face and voice both softened, in spite of himself. "As for you, dogs!" sharply exploring the ribs of the cowboys as he spoke: "I ought to have shot you down at first sight, and so I would, only I couldn't be sure the rope wasn't fast to that limb up yonder! But now—if you ever learned any prayers in your youthful days, just now's your last chance to say them over!"

"You can't—you don't dast to hurt—"

"If hanging hurts, you'll mighty soon find out, by practical experience, my fine lads!" grimly chuckled Big Horn. You've chosen the gallows, and if it don't work to perfection, blame yourselves, not me!"

"Brother!" repeated Silverblade, this time in stronger, firmer tones, though the eyes which Big Horn encountered were still sad, and even mild. "Brother, let them go, safe and unharmed."

"What! You ask this, Davie?"

"I ask it, as a great favor, brother. Let them go free, for my sake."

"They would have hung you out of hand, boy!" almost harshly.

"Can two wrongs make one right? Silverblade is living. Let them live, as well. Is it too much to ask, brother?"

"And you ask it!" repeated Big Horn, like one in a maze. "You, the son of Weenamoo, the ghost-dancer, the hostile? You ask it?"

"Yes, I ask it, brother," still in that low, subdued, unnatural tone of voice. "I was Silverblade, the Hostile—once! But all hate has died out of my heart, now. The lying clouds have drifted away, never to come back. I can see where I was wrong, but these men may not be so wise. Let them go—I ask it, brother! I, Silverblade, the Friendly!"

The young Shoshone said no more, but turned away, to kneel by the partly exposed corpse of Little Bird, his hands crossed over his bosom, low inarticulate sounds—it may have been a wordless prayer—issuing from his lips.

"You don't dast to hang us!" at length growled Jerry Black, his right arm quivering with the pain in his injured hand. "Ef you did, the boys'd hunt ye off o' the face o' the airth!"

"Button up!" sternly said Big Horn. "Don't ruin your only chance of cheating the rope, by spitting out threats. That will only make me carry out my first intention; and I'm not so mighty sure I'll alter that notion, after all!"

"Don't rub it in too turrible hard, boss," muttered Dustin, twisting his head around so he could flash an appealing glance up into that stern, doubting visage. "We reckon we wasn't doin' sech a mighty bad job, fer how'd we know he didn't kill the squaw?"

"Did you ask him, even?"

"Yes, but he wouldn't say, so a critter could jestly b'lieve him. An' so—Waal, we was jest in fun, ye see, boss, an'—"

"Fun that would have ended in hanging an innocent boy!" sternly interrupted Big Horn. "I know him—and I know you, too, Tom Dustin and Jerry Black! I wish I could say I know anything good of you, but that would be a lie! I know that you, and just such worthless curses as you, have done a thousand-fold more harm during the past few months than you could ever pay for, though you owned a dozen lives apiece! I know that, only for worthless knaves of your caliber, there would never have been half this Indian racket kicked up, for—But why talk?"

"Just now, you said that I dared not hang you. That proves how little you know of me, or my powers in this section. Did you ever hear tell of Big Horn Buck Horton, the Border Beagle?"

"You hain't— We didn't know—"

"You know now, though," came the crisp interruption. "You know that I could run you in, and if I said as much, you'd pull hemp too

quick for any sort of use! I wouldn't have to bring forward any proof, other than a show of your hang-dog faces, either."

"Whathev we done that's so turrible, boss?"

"Enough to merit hanging, a dozen times over, if your necks would only stand the wear and tear. For one thing you meant to hang yonder boy, whose little finger is worth more than a regiment of such lives as yours! Don't ask again, for it makes me hot under the collar! And—I ought to measure out the same dose to you both!"

Neither cowboy ventured to speak again, just then. Something in those harsh, almost vicious notes, warned them to silence if they wished to escape with life.

Big Horn Buck turned toward his boy pard, and Silverblade, though no word was uttered, rose to his feet and came forward. But it was to kneel by the side of Jerry Black, and gently wrap a cloth around his bullet-marked knuckles.

"They may go, now, brother?" he asked, rising to his feet after that work of humanity was completed as well as his limited means would permit. "Little Bird awaits us, brother," shivering anew as he cast a sad glance toward the little heap of pine boughs, now covering the Indian girl from sight. "They may go their way?"

"You really mean it, Davie, lad?" slowly uttered Horton, trying to read what lay beneath that grief-lined face. "They meant to hang you!"

"Yes, but Big Horn came in time. That was good, though Silverblade is no longer in love with life. That was good, for Little Bird waits, yonder, and she— They may go, brother?"

"I'll let them off without hanging, though you're the only man who could win them so much grace, Davie," said Horton, his voice softening as he pressed that slender, cold hand. "You see yonder blasted tree-top, lad? You'll find their horses hitched near its foot. Go fetch them here, Davie, an' I'll send 'em off in heap-good style!"

CHAPTER V.

THE BURIAL OF LITTLE BIRD.

SILVERBLADE found the two horses hitched near the point indicated by Big Horn Buck, and in addition he found a brace of Winchester magazine rifles, which the cowboys had laid aside as useless in their plotted "roping" of the Indian their keen eyes had discovered.

Taking both weapons and animals, the half-blood returned to where the Border Beagle was busily occupied, receiving a curt nod as he reported.

"All right, Davie! Just hitch the critters, for I'll need a bit of your help to send these gentry packing."

"Big Horn promised his brother their lives."

"Big Horn was a pesky fool for doing it, too! But promise goes, of course, since you claim its fulfillment, lad. Now—lend a boost, will you, Davie?"

As being the one least likely to attempt trouble, thanks to the lesson Big Horn had read him at the cost of a crippled right hand, Jerry Black was left lying on his stomach to wait his turn, while Tom Dustin was picked bodily up and set astride the saddle worn by the nearest horse.

A single grim hint from Big Horn caused the cowboy to yield to their will, without the slightest show of rebellion, and a few minutes sufficed to complete the work, so far as he was concerned.

With a portion cut from the lariat with which the cowboys had planned the hanging of Silverblade, Dustin's feet were snugly connected beneath the horse's belly. Another length of rope bound him firmly to the high pommel in front, then passed around the cantle behind, to be knotted securely at his middle. This rendered it impossible for the cowboy to be flung from the saddle, or to dismount voluntarily, since his arms were bound and helpless behind his back.

Big Horn Buck was fully as thorough in his treatment of Jerry Black, though he did handle him a little more tenderly, thanks to his crippled hand, and the example set him by Silverblade. In only one respect was he remorseless; the half-blood asked in vain for a less severe punishment.

"It's a heap sight too mild the way it stands, lad," was his grim answer. "I ought to be roping their necks, in place of their heels! And I'll do it yet, if you try to crowd the mourners too mighty hard! Best be content with half a loaf, Davie!"

Before lifting Black from the ground and assisting him to mount, Big Horn made a critical examination of the two horses left; and then

partly because it was an inferior animal to the one hidden by the cowboy, partly, no doubt, because of its Government brand and equipage, he selected the cavalry horse as the one to bear the crippled cowboy away from that spot.

"They'll hang me, boss, ef I'm ketched with the critter!" Black sullenly ventured, as he noticed the shift.

"I hope so!" grimly nodded the Border Beagle, briskly going about his work. "Even if you're not exactly guilty of stealing *this* bit of horseflesh, I'm open to lay long odds you've lifted plenty others just as valuable. Then, too, if they hang you out of hand, I won't have to do it the next time you and I meet up—see?"

There was no reply, in words. The cowboys were shrewd enough to see that Big Horn Buck was in one of his most dangerous moods, and while the prospect before them was anything but alluring, it was a long ways better than actual hanging.

Horton wrote a few words on two separate pages of his note-book, then tore out the leaves and pinned them securely to the backs of the cowboys, laughing grimly as Tom Dustin flinched at the prick of the pin.

"Bless your lucky lights that I'm using a pin, instead of nailing the paper fast with a ten-inch blade, Dusty! Now—if the reins don't go back on you, I reckon you can navigate all right!"

With these words, Big Horn placed the bridle reins around the necks of the bound riders, in such a manner that by throwing back their heads, or leaning to one side or the other, they could in a measure guide their horses. Then, with a sharp slap of the hand, he sent the animals away with their hampered riders.

"May the devil roll big rocks under your hoofs so fast that you'll keep stumbling until all two both o' your necks are broken at each and every joint!" muttered the Border Beagle; and the flash of his brown eyes told that he was more than half in earnest, too.

But when he turned toward his boy pard, after watching the cowboys out of sight, a change came over the border detective. His eyes grew less hard and stern, his face softened, his demeanor became that of a kind, warm-hearted man who could not only sympathize with the grief of a friend, but one who knew how to divide and help bear that burden.

He had spoken nothing beyond the truth when he declared that to no other living man would he yield, as he had given way before those sad eyes of his young friend. For years he had devoted his time and energies to hunting down offenders against the law, and bringing them to the bar of justice. And in so acting, it may be, Horton gradually came to regard himself as, at a pinch, entitled to punish those sinners whom he could not well bring to book by more regular methods.

He had really decided to hang the two knaves, and though he finally gave way to Silverblade, he could not send the rascals away without offering fortune, a chance to punish them. So, knowing that the troops would be keenly on the alert after the affair at Wounded Knee, he had bound the crippled cowboy to that military saddle, and fastened those placards on each back:

"For trying to hang an unarmed Friend.
THE BORDER BEAGLE."

But all was changed as Horton slowly drew nearer to where Silverblade once more knelt beside that little heap of pine boughs. He was no longer the avenger, no longer the stern tool of justice, but the sympathizing friend, eager to soothe and help endure.

The young half-blood started slightly at the gentle touch of that hand, but there was a faint smile upon his haggard face as his black eyes flashed an upward glance of gratitude.

"They've gone, Davie, lad, and now—tell me what you'd rather have done, and I'll do my level best to carry out your wishes."

Silverblade drew aside several of the boughs, then turned back the coarse blanket until the gray light fell fairly athwart that cold, dead face.

It was free from blood, and bore no marks of paint. It had been fairly comely in life, for Little Bird was young, and Thunder Strike, her father, had never made a drudge of his only child.

The face was more than comely, now, despite the shadow of awe with which death clothes each one of its victims. And as Big Horn stood with uncovered head, gazing down upon the dead maiden, he could almost believe a smile had been frozen upon that dusky face.

"My brother knows what Little Bird was, when he first looked upon her," muttered the

young Shoshone, in low, husky tones. "The fawn was not more happy, more light of heart and of foot! Now—*this* is what Silverblade has made of Little Bird!"

"Not so, Davie, lad," said Horton, his hand gently touching that bending head, a slight frown wrinkling his brows for the moment. "You never harmed Little Bird. You gave your love to her; and—"

"That was a lie, and Little Bird knew! Her lips told me, before death sealed them forever!"

"You meant it for truth, and truth it surely would have become, only for this—and you were not to blame for *that*! How did it happen, Davie, lad? You were at Wounded Knee?"

The half-blood nodded assent. Just then he could not find words to utter. But Horton understood.

"I reckoned you were, long before I found you here, this morning, Davie. I tried hard to get there in time, though I never dreamed of such a terrible ending! I failed, but when I found the chief—you know what happened to Thunder Strike, Davie?"

"I saw him die. He was a true brave, for he died fighting. While I—I am neither dog nor wolf, but a poor, miserable mongrel!"

"I'd split any other lips that dared even hint as much, David Woodbridge!" with a flash of fire in his brown eyes. "And even you—But, never mind, just now. Little Bird awaits burial. Will you let me do the work, Davie?"

Silverblade made no reply, in words. He bent forward until his quivering lips touched that cold brow, then his hands replaced the blanket until naught of face or figure was left unhidden.

"We've got no tools to dig a regular grave, Davie," muttered Big Horn Buck, in answer to the inquiring look given him by the half-blood. "We can't well carry the poor child with us, so—I'll fix a place where she can rest in peace until we can come back, better fixed."

That was not a difficult task, thanks to the nature of the ground.

A V-shaped depression between two large rocks was selected, and after lining this with pine and cedar tips, the body was gently placed in position. Other small branches were placed above the corpse. Flat stones were laid across, held from actual contact with the body by the sloping rocks on either side. Then numerous stones were piled over all, until there was no danger of wild beasts ever disturbing the dead.

Although Big Horn Buck wished as well as offered to do all the work, Silverblade labored to the end, though with a curious heaviness in his every movement that caused Horton no little uneasiness.

He could understand how the half-blood might feel great sorrow for the untimely fate which had overtaken Little Bird. He could even comprehend how the youth, always of a supersensitive nature, might blame himself as the actual cause of her death. But there was something beyond all that weighing him down; something that hinted strongly at an unbalanced brain, if not actual lunacy!

He waited with poorly concealed uneasiness while the Shoshone bent in silent prayer beside that rude grave, but the instant Silverblade uncovered his face, Big Horn spoke, briskly:

"Now I want you to think a bit o' my scalp, Davie! If those two sweet ducks should happen to meet with others of their kind, they'd come back just a-whooping, wild for hair! So—I want to skin out o' this, and I want it mighty bad, too!"

Without waiting for a response, he hustled about, making Silverblade buckle on one of the belt-of-arms taken from the cowboys, and slipped one of the Winchesters into the slings attached to the saddle of the horse taken as exchange for the one which bore Jerry Black away. He even helped the half-blood into the saddle, then led the animal briskly away toward the spot where he had hidden his own horse at sighting his young friend and his captors.

"That's heap sight more like it!" he chuckled, as he swung himself into the saddle, then put both animals into brisk motion, heading nearly due north. "I talked mighty brash to those curs, but there was a spice of fanfarona about it, after all, if the truth must be confessed! I reckon I stand pretty square with the boys in blue, but—well, I'm not advertising to fight an entire regiment, and after Wounded Knee, I do reckon the boys would shoot first at sighting a copper-skin! For, I reckon, you hit a lick or two before you got clear of the jam, Davie?"

"No. Silverblade did not fight. He will never fight again. He *did* ask for peace, but when he saw Thunder Strike die, and Little Bird cry out as a bullet struck her, he—"

His voice, husky from the first, died away in what would have been a groan, only for his red blood.

Big Horn understood, as well as though that sentence had been finished, but he dared not touch upon that subject again, just then. With all his apparent carelessness now that their dead had been put away forever, he was anxiously studying his boy pard, and taking note if that rapid ride was being of any benefit to his clouded brain.

He could not decide, so soon, but he felt reasonably sure that the ride would do no harm to the curiously afflicted half-blood, and he did know that there was a stern necessity for their gaining some safe place of refuge before many more hours had passed over their heads.

"Maybe you haven't noticed it, Davie," he said, after a considerable space had been covered, cocking an eye toward the gray heavens, "but if there isn't a he-old blizzard brewing, I'll eat my hat without pepper or salt! It'll play hob with the soldiers, but I reckon there's many a pair of red-skin eyes watching those clouds, and praying for snow, harder than they ever prayed for the coming of the Messiah!"

"Don't—there is no Messiah!" huskily muttered Silverblade.

CHAPTER VI.

A FRIENDLY LECTURE.

"THERE is a Messiah, Davie, lad, but He lives for all; for white, as well as red," gravely responded the Border Beagle, one hand gently but firmly touching that bowed form.

Silverblade made no reply, nor did Horton attempt to say more. He was feeling his way carefully, and was not yet decided just how far he would be wise in venturing. Yet on one point he was resolved: if true friendship could avail aught, they two should never part until a complete cure was wrought in David Woodbridge.

For a long time that ride lasted, the heavens seeming to sink lower and grow denser, though there was but little air stirring, and that not of the coldest. Still, it was weather to give an old hand no little uneasiness so long as shelter was lacking, and Big Horn Buck gave a short chuckle of relief as he drew rein finally, swinging himself out of the saddle, and calling back to Silverblade:

"I reckon we've got there, Davie, boy! 'Light, and I'll show you the hotel. Maybe you'll feel like turning up your nose at it, first-off, but if you don't stand ready to swear it's a genuine palace of blissful delight, by morning, I'll never croak again!"

Like one briefly rousing from a dream-like stupor, Silverblade cast a glance of vague curiosity around; to note for the first time that they were in a sort of gulch—it was too narrow and too barren to be called valley—thickly strewn with rocks and stunted shrubbery, while a rocky wall rose before their faces, darkened in spots by vines and evergreens.

Big Horn led the way to a crack or crevice in the rock wall, which proved to be the entrance to a fairly roomy sort of den, large enough to admit horses as well as men.

The Border Beagle said nothing more until after he had cared for the animals: removing saddles and bridles, rubbing their damp legs and flanks with a blanket-end, then hitching them with lariats to handy points of rock, several yards back from the entrance. But then he faced the half-blood, who was standing with folded arms and drooping head, giving his shoulder a gripping pinch as he bluntly ejaculated:

"Now, David Woodbridge, I'm going for you, rough-shod!"

Silverblade gave a start, his heavy lids lifting with faint surprise, but his eyes losing nothing of their dull, yet painful, sadness as they met that keen, all-alive gaze.

"I mean it, boy!" with a passing frown. "It's sober business, Davie, and I'm going to kill or cure!"

"Better kill—much better!" muttered the half-blood, moodily.

"Well, you'd be better off dead than living, if it's always to be like this with you!" bluntly asserted the Border Beagle, tightening his grip and forcing the half-blood back, step by step, until he seated him on a rounded rock not far from the entrance, where the light fell upon his grief-lined visage. "It's hard words to come from the mouth of an old friend, Davie, but it's gospel truth, all the same! You're worse than dead, right now, and if I can't cure you—Well, I'd a mighty sight rather bury you, as we buried Little Bird, than help keep you alive!"

"I wish you might!" muttered David, for the moment forgetting his Indian manner. "What is there worth living for, now?"

"Plenty, if you'll only let your eyes be opened to the truth! For months past, if not for years, you've been living in a false world, in a living dream. Don't I know? Haven't I watched you?"

Big Horn paused as though expecting an answer, but that brief flash had died out, and once more the half-blood sat with closed lids, with drooping head, looking like one in a drunken stupor.

Horton frowned, his strong hands clinching as though tempted to clutch and shake some life into the young man. But he refrained, using his tongue, instead:

"I don't say that you're *all* to blame, Davie, for that would be a lie. You drank the poison in your mother's milk, and it's been working nearer the surface ever since. Mind, I'm not saying anything harsh against her. Weenamoo has been a good wife, but she has not been a good mother, from a Christian standpoint."

Still no answer, still no sign, though Big Horn knew that David loved his Indian mother as few sons know how to love. And this strange insensibility added to his fears for the result.

"Weenamoo was born an Indian, and she still remains one, in heart, in soul, in brain. And you, Davie, take after her—worse luck!

"Your favorite hero was ever He-That-Fights-Long, your mother's father. He was her ideal of all that was brave and man-like. She held him up to her baby boy, as a model, and as he grew older, she taught him to pray that he might be another such warlike chieftain!"

"Luke Woodbridge was wiser, after his fashion, but unluckily his influence was too slight, and when he did exert it finally, the course he took only added to the growing evil. You know what that was; you were sent to the Indian School at Carlisle, and there the poison came to a head!"

"You came away, fancying yourself chosen by higher powers to lift your mother's people out of the mire. That would have been good, if your nature had been different, or if you had lived a few years earlier, or later. As it was, you came back just in time to strike that infernal fraud, the New Messiah!"

Silverblade shivered, his head drooping still lower; but that was the only sign he gave of hearing or comprehending those sternly good-willed words. Still, it showed Horton he was not past feeling, and with a slight degree of encouragement, he pressed his point still harder.

"Mind you, lad, I'm not saying that the Indians had no cause for growing angry. They had—plenty of it, too! They have been wronged and cheated and swindled until, if they had been whites, war would have been declared years ago! I admit all this fact, frankly. Still, I say that an outbreak such as Sitting Bull, and crafty devils like him, planned, is not the proper remedy. The Sioux can fight, and fight like very devils, too! But what good will that do? Sooner or later they must be whipped, or exterminated. You know that, Davie?"

"I know, but what else can they do?" gloomily muttered Silverblade.

"There are two courses, either one of which would work better than the present plan, though that is not saying much, come to think!" with a short, harsh laugh of scorn. "One is to treat all Indians as the blacks were treated; set them free, with the privilege of hustling for themselves, or starving! The other is to turn them all over to the military, as ward of the Government, not sponges for agents and traders to squeeze dry!"

"To be murdered, like Sitting Bull? To be rounded up and then massacred, as at Wounded Knee?" bitterly asked the half-blood, his head lifting, his dull eyes beginning to flash, as of old. "Yes, Big Horn! if turned over to the army, the Indians would not give more trouble—for *very long!* Only long enough to die!"

"Who fired the first shot at Wounded Knee, Davie?" asked Big Horn, with difficulty hiding his triumph at having at last roused the youth from his unnatural stupor; but his exultation came too soon, for instead of replying, Silverblade sunk back into his former attitude.

"Davie, boy," his tones growing softer, in keeping with the subject he was introducing: "Davie, do you know, I think it was well that Little Bird died as she did!"

"What do you mean?" hoarsely asked the half-blood, again rousing.

"Just what I say: that it was a blessing Little Bird died! She knew just enough about what life should be for her people, to be un-

happy, and to have trouble through all her days. She was too much like you; she would have tried to make life perfect, all in a lump!

"And then, too, Davie, she and you could never have lived together as man and wife ought to live. She was all red. You are half-white, though you nearly killed yourself trying to drain the white blood from the red. And, Davie, though you may not realize it, that white blood is surely if slowly coming to the surface. If you had married Little Bird, and both had lived ten years longer, you would have kept from killing her, only by taking your own life. *I know it, Davie!*"

"That is a lie, Big Horn," slowly but emphatically said the half-blood. "You think it is truth, but I know it is a lie. But—Little Bird is dead, and I—I will devote my life to the ends we planned together, while I led the poor child to meet her death! I will give my life to missionary work, and maybe—"

"Don't you be *all* fool, boy!" harshly interposed Horton. "You're broken down, in brain if not in body. You need rest, more than anything else. As for following that craze—did Little Bird ask you to do it, before she died?"

The instant that query crossed his lips, Big Horn knew he had made a lucky shot, from the sudden cloud which came into that haggard face. And so he pressed his point, until Silverblade reluctantly admitted the whole truth; until he told how, with her dying breath, Little Bird had urged him to abandon all their visionary dreams, and go back to his people a bare man no longer!

"And right there Little Bird showed her good sense!" declared the Border Beagle, abruptly rising from the seat he had taken, passing back beyond the horses and using blankets to form a rude couch for his boy pard.

While talking, he had never ceased his keen scrutiny of the half-blood, and the result of his study was this: Silverblade was completely worn out, in mind as in body, by all that he had passed through of late. He must have rest, of brain as of body, and that right speedily, or his mind would surely be wrecked.

Having formed the couch as well as his limited means would admit, Big Horn Buck came back, with something of his old-time cheeriness in voice and on face.

"I'm not voting for *your* stomach, Davie, but mine howls mighty loud for a sup of hot coffee and a hunk of solid meat! I've got the raw materials handy, and if you'll just get a move on yourself, big enough to scratch leaves from these corners, I'll start a fire and stop a yawning gap—if not a couple of 'em!"

Silverblade sluggishly lifted his heavy lids, but that was all. He had sunk back into that ominous stupor which was more like death than healthful repose. But Big Horn lost no more time in trying to rouse him up, believing that he had hit upon the proper remedy to be applied.

It did not take long to collect material for a fire large enough for an old campaigner to boil a cup of coffee and warm a slice of meat, and until that was done, Horton let his boy pard rest unspoken to.

He managed to rouse him sufficiently to swallow the hot coffee, made doubly strong for that occasion; and by pushing the bits into his mouth, induced Silverblade to eat a little hot meat. Then, half-leading, half-carrying him, Big Horn took his patient back to the blankets, laying him down and wrapping him up, head and toes.

Not until this was done, and not until he felt sure Silverblade was surely passing from that unnatural stupor into a healthful sleep, warmed and nourished by the hot food and drink he had swallowed, did the Border Beagle care for his own wants, though they were clamorous enough to be disagreeable.

While snow was melting in the blackened quart cup, and gradually coming to a boil, Big Horn crouched over the little fire, his brain even busier than his hands as they skillfully fed the flames.

His thoughts were mainly of David Woodbridge and his future, for he had learned to dearly love this strange, sensitive, wayward, yet kind-hearted youth, whose past few months had compassed enough hope and despair, joy and grief, elation and dejection, to turn almost any head gray.

"If sleep and rest don't cure him, then there's only one chance to save him from going clean crazy!" he muttered, with a gloomy frown as he watched the slowly rising steam. "I'll take him back home, to his sister and his father. If Little Sure Shot can't cure him, then he's doomed! If his father—Devil fly away with his mother!"

That was the one point to be dreaded, knowing as he did how Weenamoo had influenced her son from the hour of his birth. And yet, she loved her boy-brave as only a mother can love. If she was white, instead of being all Indian!

Still, he might play off Little Bird against Weenamoo, and with a loving sister, an honest father, as backers, the battle might still be won, even against the Indian mother.

Big Horn Buck had just drained his cup of hot coffee, and was swallowing his final morsel of meat, when he was startled to his feet by the report of a rifle or pistol.

CHAPTER VII.

THE BORDER BEAGLE STRIKES A SCENT.

His first glance was cast toward the rear of the den, for it seemed as though the sound had come from that direction: but a second thought showed him how highly improbable that idea was, and he sprung to the masked entrance, drawing a revolver as he parted the bushes barely sufficient to permit a glance across, then up and down the gulch.

All was still, there. The shot was not repeated. There were no sounds of hoofs, of human feet, no—

Big Horn Buck gave a sudden start, and his look of stern watchfulness changed to wondering doubt. For, only a few rods away from where he crouched, he made out the gaunt shape of a mountain wolf. And as he looked, the animal dropped to its haunches on top of a bare rock, lifting one hind foot to scratch its neck, as though to dislodge a flea!

"'Twasn't out here, or that brute'd never show up so mighty careless!" muttered the Border Beagle, unwittingly adding fresh proof to that conviction; for, as he gave a start, letting the parted bush slip from his fingers, the wolf gave a muffled howl and swiftly skulked away under cover.

Horton stepped outside, and just caught a glimpse of that gray ghost as it vanished down the gulch. If he had required any further proof, that sudden fright would have convinced him beyond a doubt.

If that shot had been fired in the gulch, anywhere near enough for its echoes to reach his ears, buried in deep thought as he had been, he knew the wolf would have been in flight, or under dense cover long before he could have sighted it.

"Then—where did it come from? Who shot? How did—Lord of love! not that!"

A terrible fancy flashed across his wondering brain, and for a single breath Buck Horton staggered like a drunken man.

He remembered how he had turned toward the back of the dark den at the shot. He remembered how dull, how muffled the report had sounded, and yet how near it had seemed, first-off.

What if Silverblade had fired that shot?

Rallying by a desperate effort, Big Horn sprung back through the irregular opening in the rocks, snatching up a still blazing brand, then hastening to where he had left his boy pard.

There lay the blanket-shrouded form, just as he had left it, so far as his first glance could say. And yet—was it the same? If sleeping, ought there not to be at least the faint sound of breathing?

Big Horn stood like one petrified during those few moments, leaning forward, painfully listening; but not the slightest sound came to his anxious ears. If Silverblade had indeed been a corpse, he could not have lain more quiet.

Then, with a strong effort, Horton broke the spell, and learned the glad truth. Silverblade was sleeping. His forehead was warm, and felt slightly damp to the touch. His sleep was so profound that his breathing gave no sound, even when Big Horn bent an ear to his lips.

Gently covering the half-blood up as before, Horton backed away, casting aside the smoking brand as he drew a long breath of intense relief. He had suffered acutely during those few moments, and he was not yet ready to laugh at his wild fears as foolish.

"'Twould have been a crazy act, but—Davie's too near crazy for a friend to see any fun in it! I could almost have sworn—I thought he'd ended all doubts, by blowing his brains out, by way of his mouth!"

The border detective had been shaken in nerve more seriously than he would have admitted, if charged, but now that his worst fears were set at rest, he fell to work in hopes of solving the mystery of that rifle or pistol shot.

"If there was another end to this hole, the rest would come easy enough, but there isn't: don't I know?"

So he thought, but common sense told him that the shot had not been fired in the gulch by means of which they had found this refuge. And even if it had come from the top of that rocky hill, which was highly improbable, recalling the comparative distinctness with which the sound had reached his ears, the shot would have sent that wary wolf to cover, beyond a doubt. And so, too, if the marksman had been on the much lower ground to the south of the gulch.

That left but one alternative; the shot had been fired by some one to the north; by some one hidden in the very den to which they had ridden as a shelter against the brewing blizzard.

So reasoning, Big Horn Buck quickly scattered the remnant of the little fire, and even as he did so, he took notice of a peculiar fact which had until that instant escaped even his trained senses.

The smoke slanted slightly toward the entrance, instead of away from it, as one would naturally suppose!

For a little this new fact gave the detective quite a start, but then an explanation offered itself. The wind was coming from the northeast. There were a number of cracks leading up from the irregular roof of the little cavern, and no doubt this faint draught came through one or more of them.

"Still, that don't account for the shot!" frowned Big Horn, taking a precautionary look at his weapons, then silently pressing toward the back of the dark hole in the rocks. "I'll swear it came from *this* direction, and I could almost swear it *was* a shot!"

Groping around through the darkness, holding himself in readiness to meet and foil any sudden attack should be actually uncover a hidden foe, the Border Beagle twice circled that contracted den, without making any discovery which could throw even a ray of light upon the mystery of that shot—if shot it really had been.

"If? No 'if' about it!" he muttered to himself, half-savagely. "I'm not crazy, if the boy is. *I heard*, and now—I'll see, or know the reason why!"

He moved back to where a few red sparks told of the hastily scattered fire, and quickly created a blaze by using his breath vigorously. Then, with a smoky torch of dry pine, he returned to more closely investigate a certain fact which had troubled him on his last round.

That was a fairly steady draught which seemed to rise from the rough floor of the cave, and now, aided by the torch, Big Horn Buck made what promised to be an important discovery.

Close to the rear of the den, a shelving rock came nearly down to the floor, its base partly masked by a quantity of twigs and leaves which had been drifted by strong winds in from the gulch. From a hole among these came that draught, strong and fairly steady as Big Horn enlarged that opening until—

"Where can it lead to?" he muttered, as he saw ample space for even his person to pass beneath that shelf of rock. "Surely, not clear through 'the hog-back'? And yet—that's where the shot came from!"

He cast the smoky torch back to the little fire, pausing barely long enough to make sure Silverblade was still soundly slumbering, then crawling under the rock-shelf, to guardedly rise erect a few feet beyond what he had until then taken for the rear wall of the den!

True, he had never given the place a very careful examination, simply because no such need had arisen. He had only been in the den once, but knowing from past experience that a hard storm was slowly brewing, he had recalled the circumstance when he saw how sorely Silverblade stood in need of rest and quiet.

Knowing that, so long as the hole kept to its present level, the other end could not be far distant, since the ridge, or hog-back, was of no very great dimensions, Big Horn crept along on his hands and knees, feeling each foot of the way before advancing, keeping his ears on the keen alert for suspicious sounds.

His growing belief that the hog-back was actually tunneled, gained force as he noted the steady draught, faint though that was, striking against his face, always coming from the same quarter. And then he came to an abrupt pause, for an unmistakable scent made itself perceptible to his quivering nostrils.

"Tobacco-smoke! And mighty rank tobacco at that!"

Once more the detective crept forward, and

once more he came to a short stop; this time through a warning given by his keen eyes.

Directly ahead of him shone a tiny star of red light!

For several minutes Big Horn advanced no further. Holding his guns ready for use in case of need, he watched that light until assured that it was a reality, not a trick played him by overstrained eyes. And then, by slowly, silently moving first to the right, then to the left, he made yet another discovery.

That light came to his eyes through a small aperture, for by moving hardly a yard to either side, the red star was completely blotted out.

"That settles it!" was his final decision, as he replaced his pistols in their holsters and prepared to crawl forward once more. "There is a cave of some sort on yon side, and somebody's making himself mighty much at home! Wonder if he'd kick up a bother if a fellow of my caliber should take a back-door squint at his dignity?"

However much he might doubt, Big Horn did not take the trouble to ask permission, but crept along until his right eye was pressed close against a narrow crack in what appeared to be a rock wall, forming the rear to a small den, very like the one on the opposite side of the ridge.

It was anything but a comfortable position, for he had to do no little crowding before he could win near enough that little hole to use his eyes; but once there, Big Horn felt amply repaid for his labor.

The low-roofed den was brightly lighted up by a cheerfully crackling fire, by the ruddy rays of which Big Horn counted seven men, all of white blood, though hardly specimens for one of the same race to be proud of. And, as he used his ears as well, Horton quickly learned that there were a number of others just then out of his eye-range.

"That's all right," were the first connected words he caught, coming from one of the invisible men. "He's only *one man*, after all, and if you'll just set him up afore me, I'll take the contract of knocking him down—and out, too, for that matter!"

"You'll never have the chalice, pard, ef I sight him fu'st!" came a vicious voice, the first note of which caused the Border Beagle's lips to pucker for a silent whistle. "He's bu'sted my best paw, but I kin shoot plum' center with my left duke, ef I hev to!"

The firelight shone on a bloody bandage as a hand went up as though to clinch the savage oath which ended that hot sentence, and then Big Horn Buck knew his ears had not played him false. Jerry Black had met friends, and was now at liberty to nurse his revenge.

"You can talk, all of you" came yet another voice: deep, resonant, peculiar enough to give the listener yet another shock, though it was of grim, almost fierce pleasure as his memory recalled the face and record of the yet invisible speaker. "Unless he was giving you guff, I'd feel easier in mind if I knew a regiment of ordinary men were on my track, than that the Border Beagle was within scenting distance of my heels! I know him—to my bitter cost!"

"But, boss, he's only one man, while we're more'n a dozen!"

"You'll think he's a thousand, rolled into one, if Big Horn ever takes your track, Bartons!" grimly laughed the owner of that deep voice.

"Waal, I don't reckon his turnin' up in the same state'll skeer ye clean off the hunt, boss?" growled one of those almost directly under the detective's eye. "You'll swipe in our game, I reckon?"

"How'll the durn critter know it in time to chip?" came yet in a different voice. "An' ef he don't git thar in time to see, what'll his blasted nose tell him? That a wheen o' hostiles jest made a clean sweep as they broke fer the Bad Lands! 'Twon't be the first time we've left the reddies to pay scot while we bagged the boddle, will it?"

"Nor the last, I'm hoping," with a short, ugly laugh. "Of course we'll turn the trick, for it's too rich to throw over our shoulders. That is," with an after-thought, "if Campbell don't take a scare, and pull out before we can make the rifle!"

"An' ef the blizzard don't bu'st too durn soon! Ugh!" with a shivering move closer to the fire, one foot kicking the blazing sticks and sending a flurry of sparks whirling to the low roof.

"You're entirely too cold-blooded for a winter campaign, Johnny," chuckled that resonant voice. "Now I'm just hugging my good luck over what makes you growl. Why, man, can't you see that a blizzard is the very thing

for us? It'll cover our tracks, and when the job does come to light, of course the reds will have to take the blame. And so I say, what I said before: if Campbell don't scare out before the night comes, and if Big Horn don't—" A howling blast of wind cut his speech short.

CHAPTER VIII.

HOLED UP BY A BLIZZARD.

The fire roared, sending a shower of sparks and acrid smoke into the faces of the men gathered around it, causing them to scatter in haste; but Big Horn did not wait to note the result.

His face did not entirely shut off the draught, and a stream of bitter smoke partially blinded his eyes, while he felt an almost uncontrollable desire to sneeze.

Luckily he managed to check that impulse, by pressing his tongue firmly against the roof of his mouth, at the same time curling a finger tightly around his upper lip as he backed away from the crack in the rock wall. And then, as soon as he felt confident that he would not betray himself by sneezing, he made a quick but careful examination of the rocks before him.

There was but one hole through which light could make its way, and into this he crowded a stone, backing it up with a dark handkerchief, thus almost entirely shutting off the draught. If the evil gang to whose dark hints he had been listening, were in ignorance of the opening on the opposite side of the hog-back—as he had been of *this* one—there was little danger now of their making that discovery before their unwitting testimony could be used against them.

This done, and seeing no further precaution which he could take in that quarter, Big Horn Buck backed out of the narrowing crack until he had room to turn round in. Then, with better speed, since he knew there were no dangerous pit-holes covered by the darkness, he made his way back to the spot where he had left his boy pard fast locked in sleep.

Just so he found him now, apparently not having stirred a limb or muscle save those called into play by his soft, noiseless, regular breathing.

"The best thing for him, too!" murmured Big Horn, as he gently replaced the covering, then drew back with a troubled glance toward the entrance. "It's nature's own medicine! I doubt if he's had a dozen hours honest sleep since he took that infernal ghost-dance craze! It ought to be the making of him, but—how about Bruce Campbell and his girl?"

With those muttered words, Big Horn Buck passed along to the cave-entrance, greeted by a low, hungry whimper from his horse as he passed the animals by. And as he parted the bushes which screened the hole, a few particles of frozen snow stung his face.

Although in a measure sheltered by the hog-back, wind was eddying through the gulch, with that low, mournful, soughing sound so significant to experienced bordermen; the sad, lugubrious wail of the distant but coming blizzard!

Big Horn was a bit surprised at first, for he had lost count of the hours, and could hardly realize that night was actually upon them. Already his keen eyes could reach but a few rods with distinctness. In less than an hour, the gulch would be lost in darkness, for neither moon nor star could pierce those heavy, thick-laying clouds overhead.

The spitting snow stung his upturned face. The wind came in stronger swirls. That melancholy moaning sound gathered strength and distinctness with each passing minute of time.

"It means a blizzard, or all signs lie!" muttered the Border Beagle, as he made an uneasy move. "I'd ought to know the way to Campbells, even in the dark, but—"

He left the sentence incomplete, stooping to gather a few dead sticks against which his feet struck as he moved forward. With an armful of fuel, gathered more by the sense of touch than through the aid of his eyes, Big Horn returned to the little den, thinking seriously as he nursed the remaining coals into a tiny blaze.

He had gathered enough from the words let drop by the evil gang under Cross-cut Cale Atkins—he of the deep voice—to know that deadly peril menaced Bruce Campbell, farmer and stock-grower, and under ordinary circumstances, he would not have lost a minute in setting forth on a ride of warning. But now—how could he do it?

To say nothing of the blizzard which might burst at any hour, bearing death on its frozen wings, there was David Woodbridge.

"He'll go clean crazy if he don't get rest—just such rest as he is getting right now!" grimly mused the detective. "Maybe he's too far gone for even that to save his poor brain, but to rouse him now, would be worse than cutting his throat!"

He thought of leaving his boy pard, and making the trip alone, but there were hardly less serious objections to that course of action.

"If it's a genuine blizzard, as all signs foretell, it might be a solid week before I could get back here—even granting I got to Campbell's before the blizzard caught me! And Davie—poor lad! He's likely to sleep a full day or maybe longer, if left to himself. And without a fire, what'd that mean? *Death, by freezing!*"

That reflection caused Big Horn to spring to his feet and hasten outside, where he gathered load after load of fallen wood, bringing it back and stacking it against the side-wall. Luckily there was no lack of fuel handy in the gulch, else matters would have looked even more serious; and that was needless!

The snow was spitting still more viciously, though as yet only a hint of what lay back of it. That mournful wail was growing to a malignant howl, and the cold was rapidly increasing, coming all the more disagreeable by forming such a contrast to the unusually mild weather of the past week.

Big Horn found a dead cedar, and after snapping off the lower limbs, he managed to drag the solid trunk inside the den, when he felt fairly well guarded against freezing, at least. And then, warned by the hungry whimper of his horse, he hastened to cut a quantity of young cottonwood limbs, and a few edible bushes, bringing them inside, but feeding the animals with a sparing hand, muttering:

"Tough chewing, pards, and mighty wearing on the grinders, but if you're wise, you'll make a clean grist of it all! Maybe we're holed up for a solid week, and if that's the programme, you'll need a mighty sight more fodder than you're likely to get!"

And still Big Horn Buck had not fully decided to remain there, letting Bruce Campbell and his fair young daughter, take their chances.

He bent over Silverblade, listening intently. That providential sleep was unbroken, and the longer it lasted, the stronger grew the detective's hopes.

"If I could just get him to swallow a fair dose of this!" he muttered, as he drew back, touching a metal flask of whisky which he carried in his breast. "I wanted to try it, but feared to make his brain worse. Still, maybe the meat and coffee will keep him quiet long enough, as it is."

Instead of the flask, Big Horn drew forth his notebook, and writing a few words in big, bold letters, he tore out the page, to pin it fast on the bosom of the sleeping half-blood.

"He can't help but notice that, if he happens to rouse up before I get back," was his muttered comment, as he turned toward the dark rear of the den. "He'll wait, I reckon, unless—curse it all!" with savage rage against himself. "Can't I keep that ugly fear crushed out?"

Passing under the shelving rock, the detective made his way through the utter darkness without a sound that could have alarmed Cross-cut Cale and his gang, even had they been on their guard against espial. And, though without that red star to guide him now, he experienced but little difficulty in again finding that tiny loophole for observation.

Cautiously removing the kerchief and stone, Horton once more took a look into the other chamber, his eye winning a brighter sparkle as he caught sight of a tall, athletic figure directly opposite, squatting on his heels where the ruddy glow fully revealed his face and form.

It would have been a fairly good-looking face, only for the deep scar of knife-cut or saber-slash which crossed it from left temple to right jaw, severing the bridge of the nose, and leaving a grim twist to one corner of his mouth. No need to ask from whence came the sobriquet of "Cross-cut." Caleb Atkins bore the answer on his grim front!

"Blizzard she am, for keeps!" the chief was saying, with a deep, ugly laugh, as Big Horn studied that marred visage. "If it holds us here, it'll keep Campbell and his girl under roof, just as sure! We'll find our game when we're ready to claim it, never you fear!"

"Ef they hain't pulled foot fer Barton's Ranch, a'ready!"

"They hadn't early this morning, when I stopped at the door, to ask my way to where

I hadn't the remotest idea of going," with another grim chuckle.

"What'll we do with the gal, ef we do ketch 'em both, boss?"

"What would the Injuns do, if they really made the raid?" viciously sneered the ruffian, his scarred face telling even more than his tongue.

Big Horn Buck waited to hear no more. He had to bite his tongue fiercely to choke back the vengeful curse that tried to find vent, and fearing to trust himself longer, he quickly plugged up the hole, backing out of the crack, to once more grope his way back to the other den.

Now, as before, he found Silverblade fast locked in slumber. Now, as before, he found the frozen particles of snow stinging his face as he passed along for another look outside. And groping through the darkness which filled the gulch, he collected another load of fuel, then set about building a rude stone wall just inside the entrance.

He had finally decided to wait where he was until Silverblade roused up of his own accord, even if the brewing blizzard should pass by without actually bursting in all its traditional fury.

"He's more to me than all the Campbells this side of glory!" Big Horn muttered, as he completed that wall, then blockaded the opening under that shelving rock, to keep the smoke from betraying them should the wind shift and send the draught toward the evil gang.

This double precaution taken, Big Horn dragged the dry cedar across the fire, then squatted down with a saddle-blanket over his shoulders, to snatch an hour or two of really needed sleep.

He knew that the increasing cold would rouse him before harm came to Silverblade. He knew, too, that, weary though he was, the half-blood could not make a stir without wakening him. And so, feeling comparatively at ease in body and mind, the Border Beagle dropped off into a sound sleep.

How long that slumber lasted, he had no method of determining, for, on a rough campaign similar to this, he never carried a watch, and he could not pass outside for a glance at the sky.

"Holed up, by glory!" he ejaculated, as his eyes fell upon a snow-drift which had sifted through his rudely built wall in front. "We're lucky if it don't split the hog-back wide open, too!"

There really seemed cause for that grim sentence, for the wind was raging, and the mass of rocks composing that barren ridge actually seemed to shiver and tremble before its might!

The fire had nearly died out, but Big Horn's first thought was of Silverblade, and he sprung toward that point, to mutter, thankfully:

"Sleeping still? Thank God for that, anyway!"

CHAPTER IX.

SCOUTING THROUGH THE SNOW.

THROUGHOUT that day (Dec. 31, '91) the blizzard raged, and while the cold did not seem so extraordinary to Big Horn Buck, sheltered as he was to a certain degree, he gathered one crumb of grim consolation from those howling winds and blinding particles: Bruce Campbell would have little to dread from unfriendly visitors just ten!

Big Horn did what lay in his power to make that bare den endurable, his first thought being for Silverblade, his boy pard. He used some of the snow which the whirling winds had drifted into the cave, to fill up all crannies between the rocks forming the barricade he had built, and by so doing he robbed the cold of its keenest edge.

Thanks to the snow, too, he kept his quart cup simmering, ready to be transformed into a coffee-pot at the first sign the half-blood gave of waking up from that long sleep.

He did not make another trip through the dark to play spy on the Cross-cut gang, for he felt pretty certain even the lust of gold would be powerless to draw them from their den so long as that howling storm lasted. And then, too, he knew that even if they should make such a rash break, he would not do likewise.

He had fully decided that point in his mind. His first duty belonged to David Woodbridge, and that duty he would perform.

"I told Little Sure Shot I'd bring her brother back, safe and sound, and as nearly in his right mind again as sober talking could fetch it around," he muttered, with a vision of Enola

Woodbridge's bright face and lustrous orbs between his eyes and the fire. "The only show I see of making that pledge good, lies in letting the lad have his sleep out. So—that settles it!"

Only once that day did Silverblade rouse from that sleep, hardly less curious than had been the stupor which preceded it. That was just when Big Horn, yielding to his hunger, had made himself a cup of strong whisky, and toasted some meat.

Neither sup ncr morsel went down his own throat, you may be sure, although it took more than bare coaxing on his part to keep the half-blood awake long enough to finish the meat. Then, with a swallow of strong whisky to "make it more binding," according to Big Horn, the Shoshone once more lay asleep, lost to all outward things.

After this fashion that day passed, the night followed, and the New Year dawned.

Feeling considerably relieved of his fears concerning the sanity of his boy pard, Big Horn contrived to get a fair amount of sleep, even though the lack of covering caused him to rouse up at short intervals to mend the fire. And when Silverblade, with a very reassuring yawn and luxurious stretch, greeted the new year, be sure it was a thoroughly wide-awake pard who welcomed his rising.

At first Big Horn was very guarded in his words, covertly but keenly watching and studying the half-blood. At first he was more than a little uneasy, for Silverblade seemed unable to realize his surroundings; but that quickly wore off, and then Horton knew that his highest hopes had come to pass, for Silverblade was once more himself.

Not until all doubts on that score were put to sleep, did the Border Beagle say aught regarding the important discovery he had made; but after the young Shoshone had eaten and drank, Big Horn told him of what he had seen and heard, and Silverblade was quickly on fire to leave their retreat and carry warning to the stock grower.

"That's all right, if we only could, Davie," laughed Horton, with a shrug of his shoulders as he glanced toward the blockaded entrance. "We'd need to be inside of a rotary snow-plow, with umbrella attachments, to say nothing of leading-strings or a wind-consumer! But, one consolation: if we're holed up by the blizzard, so is Cross-cut Cale and his mongrels! Reckon you can stand it to take a sly squint at the beauties, Davie?"

Not once, but several times that dark trip was taken, but as the day began to wane, Silverblade once more showed signs of heaviness, and once more Big Horn induced his boy pard to lie down and sleep.

Night came, and passed. The wind still howled without, but the force of the storm was plainly broken, and when Big Horn Buck partially tore down the loose wall at the entrance, no snow struck his face, as before, simply because a huge drift completely covered the opening!

"I might have known it!" was his muttered comment, as he forced a passage through the drift, only to find the eddying winds had piled a vast quantity of snow in the gulch. "If Cross-cut makes a break, from his side the hog-back, what show will we have of getting there first?"

On his return to the den, Big Horn found Silverblade awake, doubtless owing in part to the cool, fresh air which came eddying through the opening Horton had made.

"The blizzard's blown itself out, Davie, lad!" was the cheery greeting, anticipating the query his boy pard was shaping. "That's enough! Not a word, or we'll have a rough-and-tumble for an appetizer! Don't you know it's clean against the law of good health and an honest stomach, to chew wind before filling up with something more substantial?"

Not until their coffee—the last brewing, by the way—was drunk, and their meat eaten, would Big Horn Buck permit his mate to even mention the Cross-cut Gang, or the necessity for warning Bruce Campbell of their nefarious schemes.

But then the two pards took a dark scout under the hog-back to their little observatory, where they learned from the lips of Cale Atkins himself, that the gang were contemplating a move upon the Campbell Ranch that same evening.

"We've got time enough and to spare, Davie," muttered Big Horn Buck, after yielding to the impatient tugging given his sleeve by the young half-blood. "It's not much past noon, and those imps'll wait until it's growing dusk, at least, before trying to play Injun."

Big Horn Buck fully believed what he said, but when the last of the "browse" had been given, their horses, and all other preparations for

a ride through the snow were completed, their mistake was made clear.

It was easy enough to leave the den which had undoubtedly saved them from death by freezing, but after that came far worse. The gulch was blocked by badly drifted snow, some of the banks being packed so hard that the horses were unable to force a passage until after Big Horn had kicked and pounded and even cut a partial opening, on foot.

All this took time as well as hard labor, and the day was far spent before the two chums succeeded in finally winning their way through the gulch, to strike comparatively open ground, where the snow had had little chance to form in drifts.

"Thank the powers that be for so much, anyway!" muttered Horton, removing his hat, to wipe his heated brow. "Next time I want to get out of the way of a blizzard, I'm going to build my nest in the top of the highest tree I can find! On top of a mountain, for choice, too!"

"Will we be in time, do you think, Big Horn?" asked Silverblade, with an uneasy glint in his dark eyes as he cast a glance around.

"Sure!" came the instant response, as Horton touched up his horse and rode forward.

But that answer came from his lips, not from his heart. He was by no means so confident, and in less than another hour, even he could no longer disguise the ugly truth: for they came across a fresh trail, plainly heading in the direction of Campbell's ranch!

"Faster, brother!" muttered Silverblade, his eyes aglow with their old-time fire. "The buzzards have out-winged us! Faster, or—"

"Steady, Davie!" cried Horton, catching the other horse by its head as the Shoshone would have dashed past him. "It's the Cross-cut Gang, for sure, but cutting our own throats won't save the Campbells."

"Will sitting down to talk, save them?" sharply interjected Silverblade, now thoroughly aroused, and once more the energetic brave Big Horn Buck had known him, up to the hour when his religious belief in the Indian Messiah was so ruthlessly crushed for all time to come.

"Maybe not, but a bit of talking may show that all wit and wisdom is not packed under one thatch: and that cover labeled David Woodbridge," grimly chuckled the Border Beagle, still holding his hot-tempered pard in check.

"First, if the gang has made an open dash for Campbell, it's all over before this, and if they haven't finished their clean-up, we'd only be in time to add two fools to their list of assets. But—and I'm looking through *this* pair of goggles, Davie! But, if Cross-cut still sticks to the idea we heard him put forth, back yonder, of waiting for the fall of night to help them turn the trick without running too much risk of chewing lead, we ought to be able to upset their game, by acting Injun in our turn. See?"

No doubt that explanation would have been clearer had there been more time to spend in argument, but Silverblade was clear-witted enough to catch the point Horton was trying to make, and instantly recognized its value.

"You are right, brother, and Silverblade is a fool," he said, bowing his head in token of submission; but quickly adding: "Show the way, Big Horn, and the Shoshone will follow!"

"All right, though I'd a mighty sight rather hear you come back to the old Davie talk," frowned the Border Beagle, moving forward along the snow-trail. "For you are David Woodbridge, now, and—"

"No, brother," quietly interposed the half-blood. "I am still Silverblade, though you may call me the Friendly."

Horton merely grunted by way of answer. That was no time for entering upon an argument which might grow heated on both sides. It was a new thing for him to yield a point so easily, even in seeming, but the Border Beagle was not yet certain his boy pard had fairly conquered that dangerous dejection, and he dared run no unnecessary risks.

It was easy work following the trail, for it avoided the deeper drifts, and the lay of the ground was such that no ravines or gulches had to be crossed or followed. So, half an hour after first striking that broad spoor, Big Horn Buck drew rein, motioning Silverblade to keep silence as he threw him his reins and slipped from the saddle, to press ahead on foot.

He was not gone long, but when he returned, his face seemed to bear welcome tidings, which was quickly confirmed by his words:

"I reckon we're in luck, Davie! Unless Cross-cut has lost his bearings entirely, he has turned out of his way, to circle the Campbell Ranch, and either make his rush from the western side,

or else to cover where he can cut off flight toward the Barton Ranch, until dark comes to help them play Injun!"

"My brother is not merely guessing?" ventured Silverblade.

"I couldn't just swear to it, of course, Davie, but I'm willing to bet long odds that way," said Horton, taking his reins and veering abruptly from the snow-trail, heading for a tolerably high range of hills nearly due west from where they had come to a halt. "We'd ought to be able to make something more than a bare guess, after a good squint from the hill yonder, so—here we go, pardner!"

Drawing near to the top of the rise, both horses were hitched to bushes, their masters crawling forward until a position was gained from whence they had an unobstructed view of the lower ground, part of which was covered by the buildings forming Campbell Ranch.

The home building was plainly visible, and a slender column of blue smoke was curling upward from the chimney. All seemed peaceful, and Big Horn Buck gave a fairly satisfied grunt as he took in the prospect.

"I reckon it's about the way I figured it out, Davie. The gang is waiting for dark to help cover their approach, and I'd lay dollars to dimes that they're right yonder, west of the house, lying hidden in the brushy swale you can see from here. But guessing don't count, and so I'm going to take a bit of a circle over yon way, to make sure."

"And my part, brother?"

"To wait right here, with eyes and ears all open. I don't mean to be caught, but such a thing is always possible. If I am, be sure you'll know it almost as soon as I do, for I'll make racket enough! If you hear shooting, mount and try the best you know how to find Barton's Ranch, for—"

"Silverblade can find Campbell's Ranch heap easiest," grimly interposed the half-blood, with a faint smile. "He will go *there*, to help them fight."

"To help them die, more like!" muttered Big Horn, discontentedly; but knowing that any argument on his part would be worse than wasted, he let the subject drop, then glided away on his scout, after giving his boy pard a parting grip of the hand.

CHAPTER X.

A MESSENGER OF EVIL.

It is rather risky business playing scout and spy on a greatly superior force, with the earth covered with a blanket of unsullied snow, but Big Horn Buck was an old hand at the business, and was content to learn just enough, without running too much risk in the attempt to gain more than was actually needed.

He found that his reasoning was correct. Cross-cut Cale had made a circuit, simply to find secure cover for his gang, and at the same time be where he could readily intercept their game in case an attempt was made to find safety in flight; for, as all were well aware, the only point within reasonable distance of the Campbells, was Barton Ranch.

"They haven't left, already," muttered Big Horn, when he made sure the Cross-cut Gang was actually sheltered among the trees and brush with which that wide swale was provided. "If they had, Cale would have struck their trail in the snow. If they had pulled out before the storm, that smoke wouldn't be coming out of the chimney. So—all right, my covey! You'll wait, and we'll work!"

Keeping in the trail broken by the enemy, as he had, ever since leaving the hills, Big Horn Buck felt little fear of discovery on the part of the gang, even should Cross-cut Cale see fit to send back a scout for any purpose. And without uneasiness on that score, he was not long in returning to where Silverblade was still on watch duty.

A few hasty words sufficiently explained the situation, and backing away from the crest, the two pards unfastened their horses, mounting and riding away at a sharp angle.

"We can't go and fetch help, in time to save the Campbells, Davie," said Big Horn Buck, after a brief silence. "There's fourteen in the gang, all told. Campbell *may* have a cowboy or two with him, but I'd hate to swear to that, for I know that he has sold out his herds, pretty well, through fear of the hostiles running 'em off. So—what is it, lad?"

"There is a squaw, brother?"

"Squaw be—blessed!" with a frown, followed by a smile and a dry laugh. "I'll tell Marcia Campbell that, by glory! I'll tell her, right before your face, Davie, lad! Squaw? Why, boy, if—"

"Then there is a squaw?" coolly nodded Silverblade. "Why does Big Horn waste his breath? We will go help the settlers, of course!"

"I knew you'd say as much," with a sigh, either real or admirably counterfeited. "I only wish you could tell a fellow who's going to help save us while we're trying to save them!"

Big Horn did not wait for a reply to his lugubrious observation, but acted like one who feels the matter is settled past all discussion.

He led the way in the saddle until further riding might be dangerous, then the two pards dismounted, pressing along a shallow draw, lying almost due east of the ranch. Their horses were left hitched in a tolerably secure covert of small trees and shrubbery, where the snow was not much too deep for comfort. Then, first taking a look to their Winchesters, the pards boldly broke cover at a point some little distance to the left of where their animals were in hiding.

"I don't reckon the imps'll sight us," muttered Big Horn as they strode forward. "Even if they should, I hardly think they'll make a break, for fear of blocking their own nasty little game. If they should try it on, do what shooting you can on the jump, and leave me to make Campbell understand what's broken loose!"

It was well enough to have every point provided for in advance, of course, but those hasty directions were only breath wasted. If the enemy really saw them—which could hardly be doubted—they made no sign, and their first check came from the ranch itself.

"Steady, gentlemen!" came a clear, stern challenge from a partially opened front door, through which the muzzle of a rifle protruded in anything but friendly fashion. "Who and what are you, first?"

"Brush the snow out of your eyes, Bruce Campbell, and take another squint, just for luck!" called back Big Horn Buck, pushing up the brim of his soft felt, leaving his face fairly exposed.

"Horton, by the Lord!" as the door swung open. "I didn't know—"

"Horton, yes, but as for 'knowing,' I'm not so mighty sure of that!" the Border Beagle cut in, quickening the pace as he motioned the stockman back. "Wait until the door is behind us all, and I'll explain."

"You're lucky to find anybody at home, though, Horton," laughed the athletic settler, as he made way for their entrance. "We were just on the point of starting for Barton's, as our best show for cheating these infernal red—"

Campbell broke off abruptly, for the first time appearing to note the race represented in Silverblade, and Horton quickly muttered:

"All right—I answer for everything Campbell."

"If he's your friend, of course I'm satisfied."

"He's more: he's my brother, Davie, lad!"

Silverblade gave a start and a low ejaculation, like one abruptly roused from a trance. He had been gazing, like one spell-bound, upon the fair face of a young woman who stood on the threshold of another room, having been drawn to the door by those stern voices.

"Your servant, Miss Marcia!" bowed Horton, with difficulty smothering a chuckle as he stepped forward, muttering a single word: that of "squaw!" into his mate's ear as he took Silverblade's hand, and faced him about for an introduction in due form.

But he had no time to waste in enjoying the confusion displayed by the half-blood at finding his "squaw" transformed into a marvelously fair maiden, with big blue eyes and golden locks, to say nothing of a figure which was healthful symmetry itself. And so, that introduction hurried over, and Silverblade bidden pass to the rear of the building for the purpose of keeping watch over the ambushed enemy, Horton quickly laid the startling truth bare before the amazed settler.

It was hard to believe, but conviction was forced upon him by the detective's earnestness.

"But, what can the devils hope to gain by raiding me?" frowned the stockman, at the same time unthinkingly slipping a hand under his coat, as a man will sometimes do when confused by learning danger menaces something valuable beyond the common, and which he has hidden on his person. "I've no stock worth their while, and—"

"What's the use in looking further for the cause, then?" laughed Horton, with a meaning nod toward that unseen money-belt. "Cross-cut Cale fancied he'd pick up enough to make it worth his trouble, be sure, though he did calculate on the muss being laid to the hostiles."

"He knows I've sold out, then!"

"Sure! I heard him dividing the funds while the blizzard was singing its hardest. His only

fear was lest you might have pulled out for Barton's before the storm broke."

"So I would have done, only for—"

"But you didn't, and now you can't," bluntly interposed the border detective. "Are you alone here with your girl?"

"I kept one boy, to help me clear up matters here, but—"

"Where is he, now?"

"He went over to the north corral, but he ought to be back soon. Why do you ask?"

"What sort of fellow is he? Can you trust him?"

"With my life, if needs be!" came the instant response. "I've known him from a boy, and a truer, safer lad never trod in leather."

"Big Horn!" called out Silverblade, from the other room. "Two men are coming this way. Both white, one on horse, other afoot."

Before the last words passed his lips, Horton and Campbell were at his side, peering out through the little window, the heavy shutter belonging to which was wide open. A single glance, then Campbell said:

"The man afoot is my cowboy, Harry Wilson, but I don't know the one on horseback."

"Well, I do!" grimly muttered Horton. "So ought you, Davie, for he's one of the rascals who tried to send you up a tree."

"Silverblade knows. Tom Dustin," quietly answered the half-blood.

"Not one of that gang, surely?" ejaculated Campbell, in alarm.

"Surely he just is, pardner! It's lucky you can swear to your own man, for he's in mighty bad company, just now! If you didn't vouch for his honesty, I'd be tempted to drop them both, without wasting time in asking their business. As it is—you can trust this Wilson!"

"Just as surely as I can trust you, or myself, even."

"All right. He's been fooled by Dustin, then. I believe I can smell the trick, but to make sure, give him a little more rope. Bring him in the house, if you can, and take care that Wilson don't chip in against us. I'll manage Dustin, if you'll look after the rest."

There was no time for more words, for the two men were drawing near the front of the building, and already hidden from view through the rear window. Luckily Campbell knew Horton, and was swift to catch a hint when it was flung in his way, for, by the time the cowboy drew rein in front of the house, the stockman was at the door with a cordial welcome on his lips.

"Light, stranger, and come inside! Look to his nag, Wilson, and—"

"Waal, I don't know," hesitated Dustin, but slipping one foot from his off stirrup as he spoke. "I'm in a heap hurry, fer the Injuns is just swarmin' all over the kentry. An' ef you're wise, pardner, you'll take your gal—'Evenin' ma'am," with a duck-like bob of his head toward Marcia, who just then became visible to his eyes. "Sorry to say it, boss, but you'll hav to saddle up an' ride hot-foot fer Barton's, ef ye hope to keep the kiver on yer cabeza!"

"Haven't I seen you before, friend?" asked Campbell, gazing keenly into that face as he added: "You're one of Barton's men, I believe?"

"Sure, boss! Jest from thar, an' only come this fur out o' my way to say as how Barton reckons you'd best pull hot-foot fer his ranch. I'm gwine to fetch a comp'ny o' soldiers, ef I kin, fer boss reckons thar's heap sight too good a show fer more fightin' 'long ith the hostiles then ary one ranch kin show up 'nough boys fer to hold the eend level! An' so, as I said afore, I jest stopped to warn ye."

"I'm mighty grateful, and if we all pull through, I'll see that you are none the poorer for your taking so much trouble. Marcia, bring the bottle and glasses, please! Light, my friend, and let Wilson give your nag a bite. You look tired and dry, yourself."

"Waal, mebbe I kin 'ford the time, an' more'n ketch up the loss fer bevin' somethin' strong to travel on," grinned the cowboy, as he swung himself out of the saddle, resigning his horse to Wilson.

"Reckon I'd best unsaddle, boss?" asked Wilson, accepting the charge.

"Waal, I don't reckon it's hardly wu'th while to bother," Dustin cast over a shoulder as he crossed the threshold. "I hain't rid so mighty fur—only from Barton's—an' I'm got to pull out as soon as I kin jump outside of a—whisky, is it, boss?" with an expectant grin upon his bronzed face as he glanced toward his host.

Before an answer could be given him, Big Horn Buck sprung from behind the door, flinging a heavy blanket over Dustin's head, at the same time kicking both legs from under him.

CHAPTER XI.

MAKING AN ENEMY USEFUL.

"STEADY, Wilson! It's all right!" quickly called out Bruce Campbell, as his cowboy caught an inkling of what was transpiring just within the door. "Don't let the horse slip you, for—"

Tom Dustin came to the floor with a solid thump, in itself pretty nearly enough to knock all the fight out of him, but Big Horn Buck was taking no chances, just then, and his weight was added to the fall.

"Fetch a rope, or something just as good, Campbell!" he called out in quick tones as his nimble hands found the throat beneath that muffling blanket.

"Will this do?" asked—not the stockman, but his daughter. "I heard what you said, and thought, maybe, you'd need—"

Busy as the Border Beagle was, just then, keeping the athletic cowboy from freeing his throat sufficiently to send forth a yell of alarm and for help combined, and hindering his blind efforts to clutch and make use of a weapon, he found time to flash an admiring glance up at that animated face as its owner held forth a coil of clothesline.

"Just the ticket, sweetness! If I had a company such as you to back me up, I could conquer the world—and not have to do very much fighting, either!"

"How can I help you, now?"

"That is not work for squaws," almost harshly interposed Silverblade, taking the coil from her hand and setting one end free for use. "Go back: the Shoshone will tie the white dog!"

"I know one knot you'll never help tie, Davie, if—you ought to be keeping watch over the swale, lad!" swiftly changing his sentence as he caught that bright gleam in the half-blood's eyes. "Drop the rope: I've choked the fellow so dizzy I can finish the job alone."

"Help our friend; I will keep watch," said Marcia, a flash of her big blue eyes directing her words as she hurried from the room.

Naturally enough matters had grown just a trifle mixed, owing to the dangerous proximity of the Cross-cut Gang, and the fact that Tom Dustin, who was clearly acting as their spy, would surely recognize either Horton or Silverblade at a single glimpse. So he had to be not only captured, but stilled, on the moment as it were; for all knew that a single yelp from his lips would surely bring his evil allies swarming across the interval, death in hand.

Still, thanks to the sureness of the Border Beagle's leap, Dustin was giving scarcely any show to either fight, himself, or fetch his mates from ambush; and when those muscular fingers had closed about his neck for a few moments, all danger from either score was set at rest, which made the rest only a matter of quick speaking and sharp understanding.

Harry Wilson was enlightened, greatly to his angry disgust, and if the half-dubbed courier had not just then been choked nearly insensible, with his arms and legs rapidly growing helpless within the rope which Big Horn Buck knew so well how to handle, Tom Dustin certainly would have been called upon to pay full worth for his plausible lies.

The rest was easier arranged. Marcia had supplied one need which time had been entirely too short to provide for, and, seeing his aid was unnecessary in that quarter, Silverblade had turned away to help Miss Campbell watch over their ambuscaded enemies.

"Keep an eye on Tommy, pardner," said Horton, with a nod to Campbell. "If he tries to sing out loud, ram a hoof down his throat, sit on his mouth, do whatever pleases ye best, just so you keep him from calling his precious mates over this way before all's ripe for them. Sabe?"

"I'll see that he don't give trouble, but what—"

"Not quite knowing, you hadn't ought to expect me saying," laughed the Border Beagle, turning toward the cowboy who still held the horse on which Tom Dustin had ridden up to the ranch. "I say, Wilson: how did you happen to pick up such a bad egg, anyway?"

"Is he a bad egg?"

"Well, if he had exploded before I hooped his shell-round with a rope, reckon you'd think he was! But—how did it come, anyway?"

"He came over where I was, and said Barton sent him to warn the boss trouble was getting too thick in this section for good health. He acted white enough, and so I brought him right along, as you see."

"Didn't see or hear of any other persons nigh about, I reckon?"

"Never a sign nor a sound, sir. But if you want me to look—"

"I want you to look and act, too, just as innocent as you know how, pardner. I want you to take this nag over to the handiest stable, as though you meant to give him a bite. Don't weary your spine by trying to make your eyes look in too many directions at the same time, but—if you can manage it without writing the question in big letters on your face, Harry, you can keep an open eye toward the west swale, where the cover grows rankest."

"It means danger to—to the boss, then?"

"It may, unless we can out-Injun the gang, pardner. You're white. You look as though you had your full share of good sense. Play your part as such a man ought, for I haven't time to talk any plainer. Only, bear in mind that the longer we can stave a fight off, the better will be our chances of pulling through without loss!"

"You can depend on me, sir. Shall I come back, or wait out there?"

"Come back, of course. I may need your help to pinch Tom Dustin into the right tune. See?"

Without pausing for more, Big Horn Buck turned back, closing the front door, and joining Campbell, who was squatting by the side of the bound cowboy, knife in hand, its keen point almost touching his throat.

"Don't let him butcher me, boss!" whined Dustin, as Horton came within his contracted range of vision; but then he shivered anew, for he recognized the detective.

"He sha'n't butcher you, [Tommy], for I've taken that contract on my own shoulders," coolly chuckled the Border Beagle, sending Campbell away to help keep watch, by a simple nod of his head. "I reckon you haven't forgotten so soon? What did I tell you when I sent you off on horseback?"

"I didn't—I never—cross my heart, boss, ef I've done ary thing wrong sence—"

"Button!" nodded Horton, deftly shutting those trembling lips with the sole of his boot. "I just love to hear a liar tangle himself all up, and then play spider to his fly; but, worse luck! I baven't the time to spare just now. So—just what did Cross-cut Cale Atkins expect to gain through sending you over here from the swale, a bit west of the ranch, Tommy?"

"I don't—he didn't—"

"Button!" and this time that foot came down more sharply, remaining in place while its owner spoke rapidly: "Will you never take a hint, Tom Dustin? Are you dead-bent on making me shut off your wind for good-and-all? If not—talk straight and skip the lies!"

"I know that you and Jerry Black were set free by the Cross-cut Gang. I know that you went into hiding while the blizzard lasted, and I can even repeat the plans you all laid while lying in that den. But I prefer bearing you talk, and so—why did Cross-cut send you here?"

"I jest hed to do it, boss!" mumbled the cowed wretch, as that foot lifted. "Cale swore he'd butcher me ef I didn't play in with his gang, an' so—"

"One more lie cooks your goose, Tommy! I both saw and heard you talk, back under the hog-back. You can't play me dirt, so why try? For the last time: Why did Cale send you here?"

"To skeer Campbell an' his gal into makin' a break fer Barton's!"

"When he calculated to pick 'em up as they tried to cross the swale, eh? Were you to stay by them?"

"No. I was to make b'lieve Barton sent me fer soldiers, an' ef I made out to skeer Campbell, that way, I was to make a sign with my hat, as I rid on furder."

"What manner of sign? Don't mako a mistake, Tommy, or it will cost you your life—no less!"

"Jest a wave, like, boss. Jест as ef I was wishin' 'em good luck in thar ride fer Barton's, when I was out whar Cale could see me."

"Of course you were to join the gang, again. Was there anything said about making big haste, or were you to use your own judgment?"

"I was to skeer Campbell out, ef it could be done, afore dusk. Ef I couldn't, an' he 'lowed to stick right byar, then I wasn't to shake the hat o' me, but was to keep right on, like I wanted to git the army the quickest. Then, when out o' sight from the ranch, I was to bend 'round an' git back to the boys. So help me, boss! I'm givin' it to ye like the Bible, an' ef you'll only—"

"I'll give your tongue a rest, if that's what you mean, Tommy!" the Border Beagle said, deftly forcing a double rag between those lips, then binding all fast with a bit of thong which

Bruce Campbell handed him when ready for it.

"You heard, I reckon, pardner?"

"Pretty much all," nodded the ranchman. "The others are on watch, and I reckoned it might save time this way."

"So it will, and we've none too much daylight to spare," with a swift glance through the nearest window. "Well, you've heard, now, what do you reckon is the best thing?"

"How many is there in the gang?"

"Thirteen, since we've bagged this duck. Too many to think of whipping in open fight, so long as we've got Miss Marcia to care for."

"Marcia would be more of a help than a hindrance, so far as that is concerned. But you're right: we can't cut our way through the gang. We'll have to close up the ranch, and fight it out on that line, then!"

"Hardly that. Fire is too easily handled by the outsiders. Cale would toast us out, too mighty quick!"

"What else can we do? I'll never yield to that infernal gang of cut-throats! I'd sooner kill Marcia with my own hand, than see her fall alive into their power!"

"So would I; double times over, pardner! But—I reckon maybe we can out-Injun the critters, if you'll help me change outsides with this rascal," nodding toward Dustin.

"What do you mean to do, Horton?"

"Do the gang, of course," with a chuckling laugh, as he passed to the other room, where he whispered a few words to Marcia Campbell.

Campbell took the hint, and thereafter worked in silence, under the direction of the detective. Casting off his own outer garments, Big Horn Buck put on the shaggy buffalo-coat worn by Dustin, turning the broad collar up about his ears, to meet the broad brim of his cowboy-hat. And then, taking a small bundle handed him by Marcia, securing it under his coat, he spent the few seconds which passed before Wilson came up to the front door with Dustin's horse, whispering busily with Silverblade.

"You understand, then, Davie, if I don't get back in time?" he added, aloud, as he moved toward the threshold.

"Silverblade understands, and will do as his brother bids."

"And you, friends," flashing a keen look over the other faces before mounting the waiting horse. "If I don't get back, trust all to my boy pard, and he'll pull you through in safety, if any one man can do that much!"

"But you *will* come back, Horton?" anxiously frowned Campbell.

"I certainly expect to, yes! Still, I *may* fail, and so—I've left you a mighty good substitute in David Woodbridge. Good-by, and good luck to us all! I reckon Cale is wondering why Tommy don't show up, so I'll let him see me on the move!"

"But—how can you get back without his seeing you? And won't be suspect a trick, when—"

"It'll help kill time if you have a puzzle to study out, pardner," laughed Horton, as he sprung into the saddle. "I'll leave this nag, and I'll come back, too! See if you can guess how, before I call out to open the door for yours truly!"

With that, the Border Beagle cantered away, heading due east at first, but then veering a bit to one side, to make sure he was seen by the ambushed outlaws before he made the signal agreed upon between Cross-cut Cale and his emissary.

When far enough from the ranch, according to his calculations, Big Horn Buck turned in the saddle, lifting his hat and giving it a flourish, like one wishing the ranchman good luck on his journey.

His eyes flashed toward the brushy swale, but made no discovery.

"Of course not!" he chuckled, as he replaced his hat and rode on at a quickened gait. "Cross-cut isn't such a fool as that! But, all the same, I'm betting long odds he's fooled, and fooled mighty bad, too!"

CHAPTER XII.

SLIPPING THROUGH THE SNARE.

WILSON entered the house, after closing the shutters, save that to the one window overlooking the swale where the Cross-cut Gang was lying in wait. To close that, would not only hinder the inmates from taking observations, but might awaken too strong suspicions in the enemy, since they no doubt were keeping a close watch upon the place.

Bruce Campbell, very naturally, was ill at ease, for he not only had a large sum of money on his person, but his daughter—all he had on

earth to love and live for—was in dire peril, if all that Big Horn Buck had reported was true. And true it was, he held no doubt. He had known Horton by reputation for several years, though their personal acquaintance was limited. Still, he felt implicit confidence in the border detective, and never once doubted the truth of his report.

He spoke apart with Marcia, asking about the bundle she had given Horton, but received little comfort: Marcia was bound to secrecy, she declared; but her bright smile and warm kiss lent him fresh courage.

Leaving Wilson and the ranchman to watch, Silverblade busied himself in a rather odd fashion, falling to work immediately after Big Horn Buck took his departure.

In the front room was a large stove, resting upon an oblong sheet of zinc. Silverblade set about removing this pliable sheet, and when it was once free, to fashioning it into an article for use, very different to that for which it had been originally intended.

At his low request, Marcia brought him another coil of small rope, and bending up one end of the zinc, in a low curve, Silverblade deftly fastened it in place. Then he cut holes through the thin metal, tying lengths of rope in place, after which, as though the structure was completed for the present, he stood it up against the wall, and took his station at the front window, sweeping the surface of the snow with eyes that never were sharper or more true.

The day was spent, and dusk was rapidly drawing near, yet objects without were almost as distinctly visible as at noonday, thanks to that carpet of unsullied snow.

"What have you been making, friend?" asked Campbell, coming to the half-blood's side, as he stood by the window. "It looks like a toboggan, so far as shape goes, but—what is it intended for?"

"My father shall know, when Big Horn comes," gently answered the Shoshone, with a grave bow of apology. "'Tis my brother's plan, and he is the right one to make its meaning clear to my white father."

"When he comes!" echoed Campbell, almost harshly in his natural anxiety. "How can he come, with those devils watching? If they see him return, they'll surely scent the trick, and then—"

"Can my white father see Big Horn coming? Let him look!"

"Where? I see nothing but the snow, and—"

"Then how is Cross-cut Cale to see more?" with a low, pleased laugh, as he moved toward the front door. "Big Horn is coming, and my white father will soon know all!"

"Open up, Davie, lad!" came the voice of the Border Beagle, only a few seconds later, and as Silverblade swung the door open, Horton stepped across the threshold, covered head and body with a white sheet, from which he shook a little shower of dry snow. "Back again, pardner! And everything is lovely?"

"All is well, brother," nodded the young Shoshone, gravely.

"But, man alive!" exploded the amazed ranchman, unable to smother his burning curiosity longer. How in thunder did you get here? I was watching with all the eyes I own, but I never saw even a sign!"

"I'll go bail Davie, yonder, saw more than a sign," chuckled the Border Beagle, laying the sheet over a chair-back. "Eh, lad?"

Silverblade saw the snow moving, but he knew what to look for. If our white father had known, he would have seen, too."

"That's right, Davie!" whispered Horton a malicious sparkle in his eye that lent his words a still keener point. "Soap him down! He's the squaw's daddy—see?"

Without pausing long enough to note the full effect of his mischievous gibe, Big Horn turned toward Campbell, saying aloud:

"I'll explain it all, friend, when there's more time to spare. It's working like a charm, so far, but we've got to keep the pot boiling, or Cross-cut may begin to smell a rat. So—Wilson!"

"On hand, sir!" came a prompt reply. "What is it I'm to do first?"

"You've got horses, of course, since you were getting ready for a night ride to Barton's. Go out, and make as though you were getting all ready for a move, that way. Show up the horses plain, but act just as you would if you didn't know any evil eyes were taking notes. You can do this, pardner?"

"I can try, sir," with quiet promptitude.

"That's right! You're a man, pardner, and the pure quill, or your voice don't belong to the throat it comes out of! Good, so far. Now, of

course Miss Marcia rides: she has a side-saddle?"

"Here it is," answered the maiden in person, bringing the article from another room. "Wouldn't it be best if I carried it out, so they could be sure I was on the place, Mr. Horton?"

"You could do that, sweetness?"

"Try me! I'm not afraid of them—very much," with a little laugh and a charming blush as she made that admission.

"They'd be devils indeed who'd try to harm you, pretty!" nodded the Border Beagle, but adding in sterner tones: "And we'll make devils in earnest out of the gang for even thinking that way!"

Then, turning to Wilson, who was waiting, he concluded his orders:

"Put her saddle on first, and hitch the horse where it can be seen from the swale. Do that much in a hurry, but don't rush with the other nags. It's still too light for giving them the slip, but if we can hold the gang back an hour longer, we'll turn the trick, like a mice!"

Wilson promised to follow his instructions to the very letter, and then left the house, the bright red seated side-saddle showing clearly over his broad shoulders.

"That part being set in motion, maybe I'd better explain just how I hope to foolish Cross-cut and his impish pets," said Horton, passing through to the rear window, followed by the ranchman and his daughter, Silverblade remaining in the front room to guard that side of the building. "First, you saw me ride off as Tom Dustin, giving the signal agreed upon in case he succeeded in scaring you into promising to make a break for Barton's.

"I struck cover, then circled far enough to leave his nag with the ones Davie and I cached before coming over here. Then, thanks to the sheet which Miss Marcia kindly loaned me, I lay down flat, and snaked it through the snow, covered from top to toe by the sheet. See?"

"I understand, but as for *seeing*—why, man! I was looking with all my eyes, and you must have been right in front of them!"

"I saw you at the window," with a low chuckle. "All right. If you couldn't sight me, when I told you I was coming back, reckon Cross-cut and his imps will be able to see you, after dark, from a greater distance by a good deal?"

"What! you surely don't mean that Marcia—"

"I surely mean that Marcia, together with her father, and her good friend, David Woodbridge, must leave this house beneath sheets, if they hope to leave it at all, in life!" came the quick response. "It can be done—it must be done, I tell you!"

"Your plans shall not fail through my weakness or timidity, Mr. Horton," quietly but resolutely observed Marcia.

"That settles it, and you might as well listen in silence, pardner," chuckled Big Horn, his eyes glowing with grim delight. "You'll slip out in that fashion, under sheets. You'll go to where the three horses are waiting. You'll mount, and circle around, southward, until clear of the swale, yonder, then ride your level best for Barton's. Understand?"

"If it can be done," hesitated the ranchman, doubtfully.

"It must be done that way, or not at all!" came the almost fierce response. "Of course we'd fight, and fight hard, but how would it end? We'd die, of course, but Marcia—it's her we've got to think of, man!"

"I could perish with you—I'd never fall into their hands alive!"

"I'd make sure of that, when worst came to worst," gravely bowed the Border Beagle, but then adding in lighter tones: "You saw how I made the trick work, and it can be done with greater ease now. I'll stay here with Wilson, to cover your retreat. If you are discovered, I'll let you know in time to get back to this cover. If not—and I'm willing to bet long odds you'll not be—then we two will cover with sheets, and crawl out this way, to steal the horses belonging to the gang. If we can't quite do that, we'll stampede 'em, and then you can easily out-foot the devils. See?"

"I see that you are taking the hardest and most dangerous part of the work on your own shoulders," hesitated the ranchman.

"Who's got a better right? It's part of my trade, and I take hold of it with all eyes open. Now—I'd like it a bit better if it was a shade or two darker, but I'm afraid to wait too long. Get sheets, or white table-cloths, spreads, anything of that caliber, Miss Marcia. Wrap your pretty self up as snug as may be, for it'll be cold riding."

Leaving Campbell to keep watch over the

swale, Big Horn passed into the other room, to tell Silverblade just what had been decided upon. He met with opposition here, for the half-blood at first declared he would not take the part assigned him, but that Big Horn Buck should accompany the ranchman and his daughter, as guide, since he, Silverblade, knew nothing of the route leading to Barton's.

"But Campbell knows, and he'll do the guiding. You'll look after the—after Miss Marcia, lad; and," in a whisper, "shoot her before letting her fall into Cross-cut's hands, Larie!"

If time had not been so precious, very likely Silverblade would not have yielded so quickly; but he knew that, now dusk had fallen and was rapidly deepening into night, the Cross-cut Gang might come upon them with any moment. And so, provided with sheets, or white coverlets, the three fugitives passed out through the front door, where lay the zinc toboggan, or flexible sledge, so carefully arranged by Silverblade.

Marcia, after a half-indignant protest, was placed upon this, with the curving front protecting her head. A sheet was carefully wrapped over her form. Silverblade and Bruce Campbell each slipped a looped end of the side-ropes over one shoulder and under the other arm, then sunk nearly flat on their breasts, with sheets covering their dark garments, until they seemed but little mounds of snow.

Then, with a whispered "good luck" from Wilson and the Border Beagle, the two men bent to their work, dragging Marcia after them on her unique sledge, quickly vanishing from sight of those anxious eyes near the front of the ranch.

Thanks to the snow being so dry and feathery, it proved easier work than Silverblade had dared hope for, and within five minutes after leaving the ranch, they were at the cover where the three horses awaited their coming. Then, still retaining the sheets, they rode away.

CHAPTER XIII.

A TRANSACTION IN HORSE-FLESH.

"I do reckon they'll make it safe, boss!"

"Of course they'll make it safe! Why wouldn't they? Reckon any such a bunch of poison blisters as the Cross-cut—Business, pardner! What's to hinder the gang from coming right in on us?"

"Blamed if I could help it, boss! I just had to see with my own eyes, if she—if they pulled through safe!" apologetically mumbled Harry Wilson, even then reluctantly moving away to his former station of observation.

Big Horn Buck uttered no reproof, for he could fully appreciate that feeling. It still held possession of him, and though there was nothing to be told by eyesight, he gazed intently along the course which he knew his boy pard and his two companions must follow in order to reach the horses prepared for their further flight.

"I hate to let 'em go alone—hate it most mightily!" he muttered to himself. "Feels like I ought to be with 'em right now, but—I can't see how the trick could be turned to better advantage, after all! Cross-cut surely won't stay in blinders much longer, and if he has a fair chance to run 'em down—Which it's my business to see he don't have, and now's the time to begin!"

Big Horn shook himself together, feeling pretty confident that his friends must have succeeded in covering at least the first part of their slow crawl without being noticed by any of the Cross-cut Gang. If suspicion had been aroused, it had taken no definite form as yet, but there was no saying how soon the enemy might make an active move, and if his plans were all to be worked out, there was scant time to be wasted in idle musings.

"All serene this side, pardner?" he asked, as he crossed to the room overlooking the western swale. "Nothing afoot to speak of?"

"Not a stir, so far as I can make out," answered Wilson.

"Well, too mighty much quiet is worse than a racket, sometimes! I reckon we'll buckle down to work. Lift the sash and close that shutter. Don't make any more noise than you have to, though! Then come out in front, where you'll find me."

The house was quickly closed against intrusion, so far as its limited means of defense would permit. Big Horn locked the front door after Wilson emerged, slipping the key into his pocket, then handing the cowboy a sheet, whispering:

"You understand the theory: let's see how you pan out when it comes to practice! Steady! Let me tie it 'round your waist, and you can manage to keep it over your head, I reckon."

"I'll try. But how about that pesky spy?" whispered Wilson.

"I took a squint at him, in passing. Don't you bother your brain. If Cross-cut finds him, of course he'll set him free, to be hung another day. If he *don't*—Well, silent cursing may keep him from freezing to death before we get back!"

Wilson asked no further questions on that score, and as Big Horn Buck, closely enveloped in his sheet, crouched low down and glided away from the house, following the trail left by Silverblade and the Campbells, he did his level best to imitate the example set him.

Horton kept to that trail—invisible even to his eyes, but perceptible to his sense of touch—only a few rods, then made a sharp angle to the left, soon after curving gradually in a manner that would, if continued long enough, carry them direct to the spot where the Cross-cut Gang lay hidden in the swale.

When once fairly clear of the house, and in a position from whence he could command an uninterrupted view of all the space lying between that covert and the ranch buildings, Big Horn slackened his pace; a fact with which Harry Wilson did not find fault.

Although Big Horn Buck seemed to find it very easy to play snow-wraith after this fashion, the cowboy most assuredly did not. Those few rods of such traveling had tired his muscles far more than as many miles of rapid running would have done, on his unclothed prairies.

"Find it just a bit cramping to the bellows, eh?" with a soft laugh, as he settled deeper into the dry snow with a twisting movement of his legs and lower body. "Well, we'll breathe a bit, for we've got the game just as we want it, now, and every minute gained is worth an hour next week. You see—"

"What's that, yonder?" swiftly whispered the cowboy, pointing almost in a line with the swale. "Isn't it something moving?"

"The gang, by glory! Down—lie close!" hissed Horton, pressing his companion nearly flat on his face in the snow. "Too late to run! If they trip over us, yelp and shoot, then break for the horses!"

There was no chance for plainer speech, and Big Horn Buck flattened himself out in the snow hands on his revolvers, and sheet covering him so completely that he seemed but a portion of that white carpet.

It was through no carelessness of theirs that this discovery was made so late, and only eyes of unusual keenness could have distinguished those silently flitting figures so soon, thanks to the dark background afforded by the trees and brush in the swale, and the soft, dry snow which muffled each footfall.

Still, the peril seemed extreme. Unless the evil gang should suddenly alter their line of travel a bit, there was great danger of some among their number actually stumbling over one of those prostrate forms.

Big Horn Buck had his head shrouded, but one keen eye was stealing a look through a tiny loophole, and even his steel-like nerves began to tingle a bit as he saw how close those skulking knaves were coming.

Then, a foot struck his ankle, and one of the ruffians plunged clumsily forward, saved from falling outright only by a series of wild gymnastics!

"What in blazes are you trying to do?" growled the resonant voice of Cross-cut Cale, who little suspected that, by uttering this fierce query, he had singled himself out as the target for the Border Beagle's first shot.

"Ketched my—devil fly away with the root!" snarled the other, viciously, yet instinctively putting more space between himself and the owner of that ominous voice.

"Devil will fly away with you, if your clumsiness has alarmed old Campbell and his girl! Halt, and listen a bit!"

A breath or two of suspense, then the evil phantoms once more moved away through the snow, leaving Big Horn chuckling in his sleeve.

As soon as he dared make a move, he reached out and gave Wilson a warning touch, then crept away through the snow, heading so as to strike well up the northern end of the brushy part of the swale.

"We're going the wrong way!" Wilson hastily whispered, as soon as he cleared his eyes sufficiently to make out their surroundings. "The devils will find them gone, and strike their trail! We must back, and cover for 'em, man!"

"Button!" growled Horton, almost savagely, giving his companion a push forward. "You swore to obey—do it, or I'll lend you my

knife, point first! Their only show is in our getting the horses, man!"

Harsh words, but Big Horn meant every one of them. There was no time to waste in argument or giving explanations. Each moment he expected to hear the Cross-cut Gang either hailing the house, or attempting to force an entrance by a grand rush. In either case the truth could not long remain a mystery, and only swift work would avail, now.

He had seen just enough before that trip and stumble came, to tell him Cross-cut was moving in force, but he had not been able to count the full number of those advancing. So, pausing at the edge of the cover, he hastily whispered to his companion:

"Maybe they've left a horse-guard, but there's no time to scout. I'll go first, and if there is only one, I'll down him too quick for a racket. If more—well, you can have what I leave, if you hurry!"

"Lead, or steel?" asked Wilson, steadily.

"Either, if there's enough here to make a fight. If it is a fight, the bigger racket we kick up the better, perhaps! Don't show up unless I call, or am downed; then, do your level best to run off the horses before the gang can get back!"

With the last whisper still on his lips, Big Horn Buck cast aside his sheet, slouched his hat over his face, then advanced into and down into the swale, with only ordinary precautions against making a noise. The lack of spare time led him to act after this fashion. If a guard had been left over the horses, the sooner he was heard from, the better!

"Who is it?" came a low, menacing challenge from ahead, followed by the ominous clicking of a gun-lock.

"Me—who'd ye reckon?" growled the detective, appropriating the voice of Tom Dustin. "Whar's the boss? He shorely hain't—"

"It's you, Dusty!" asked the guard, stepping forward, letting down the hammer of his rifle as he did so. "What kept ye so durn long?"

"Whar's the boss? Whar's the rest o'—ain't all lone, be ye?"

"Hoss-guard, yes. They've gone to see—"

"And you've gone to sleep!" grated Horton, as he struck swift and sure with a clubbed revolver, then gripped the fellow's throat with both hands before he could fall to earth.

The precaution was hardly necessary, for that deft stroke had done its work well, and the horse-guard was senseless, if not exactly asleep!

Wilson came up, and it took but a few moments to bind and gag the fellow, their fingers working none the less swiftly from their ears catching the sound of voices over at or near the ranch buildings.

"They haven't smoked the trick, as yet?" muttered Big Horn, rising from that task and stealing a few seconds for listening. "They're trying to draw Campbell out, by talking, before making an actual rush. If we work lively, they can't get that knot fairly untangled before we'll give 'em another to keep matters mixed up!"

"What comes next, then?" almost viciously demanded Wilson. "Quick, man! Set, not talk! Marcia is in danger, and—"

"Your flying off the handle, can't help her any, pardner," as the provokingly cool retort. "But work goes, and to start with, pick out a good nag for yourself, and after I've done the same, we'll rope the others so they'll be easy to lead or drive, just as happens best."

While giving this explanation, Big Horn Buck was at work, the task rendered all the more easy for them by Cross-cut Cale's hope that his marked prey would make a dash for Barton's Ranch. As that move might take place at any moment, the horses had been kept saddled and bridled, ready for use at an instant's warning.

Dim though the light was, it took but a score of seconds for two such old hands to pick out the best pair of animals, and then they rapidly "strung" the others along a couple of lariats, leaving each horse room for action, yet insuring their keeping together. But before they could quite complete this work, an interruption came.

Wild yells floated across the level, mingling with the spiteful reports of rifles or pistols, and with a fierce oath Big Horn cried:

"Come, pard! Our friends are in heap big trouble!"

CHAPTER XIV.

A HOST IN HIMSELF.

SILVERBLADE, the Friendly, had been entirely sincere in his reluctance to accept the posi-

tion forced upon him by Big Horn Buck, but having once accepted it, he bent all his energies of mind and body toward making it a success.

As already shown, the retreat from the ranch was effected without anything like a hitch, and having gained the covert where the three horses had been placed in hiding, it took but a few moments to doff their disguises and take saddle.

Luckily Marcia Campbell was a true daughter of the ranch, and knew how to accommodate herself to a masculine saddle, but Silverblade showed himself something more than an Indian, by his thoughtful care for her comfort, as well as safety.

He swung the off-stirrup across the saddle, to shorten it for her use, then, with a degree of strength which amazed both Marcia and her father, he lifted the maiden into the saddle.

"This surely isn't your first experience as a gallant 'squire to dames, Mr. Woodbridge?" Marcia laughed, softly, but with a rising blush as the half-blood clasped her foot to place it in the stirrup.

"Silverblade has a sister," was the grave response. "Better not talk, too much. The night has wings, and evil ears are open wide."

He had no chance to add to that reproof, for Marcia, just a little offended, perhaps, sent her horse off with a plunge through the deep snow, and Silverblade leaped into his saddle, to follow, dropping another word of caution as Bruce Campbell came alongside:

"You talk, white father! Tell her there is danger in being *too* fast. Time enough for that when we are further along."

Campbell gave the suggested hint, and Marcia accepted it in silence. Silverblade, who seemed trying his best to keep all in mind that he was an Indian, led the way in grim silence after that brief episode, heading as directed by the Border Beagle, toward the south, intending to circle around at a safe distance from the ranch, to eventually strike due west, since Barton's Ranch lay in that direction.

This course kept them for some little time on lower ground, where the winds of the blizzard had drifted the snow to some extent. That fact rendered their progress slower than might have been wished, but with so many keen and hostile eyes on the lookout, to venture on higher ground too soon might have proved fatal to their hopes of winning clear without discovery forcing them to a race for life or liberty.

The three fugitives, despite the obstacles which they were forced to overcome, had reached a point nearly due south from the ranch, when trouble came from a totally unexpected quarter.

As after events proved, Tom Dustin had unwittingly touched upon the truth when he told Campbell the hostiles were about, and, without a sound to warn them in advance, our trio of friends ran fairly upon a small band of Sioux, who seemed hardly less surprised as they sprung up out of the snow, yelling and firing as they did so.

With a wild plunge, the horse ridden by Bruce Campbell went down to death, its rider barely clearing his feet from the stirrups in time to save himself from being caught beneath the stricken animal.

Marcia gave a little cry as her horse plunged away through the snow, and Silverblade, with a single glance after her, leaped to the ground, catching the reeling ranchman and fairly swinging him into the saddle left vacant by the half-blood, crying sternly:

"Go—help the squaw!"

And then, using his left hand to sharply strike his horse on the haunch, sending it off with a snort of pain and fright, Silverblade sent a stream of fire and lead into the midst of the hostiles from the revolver drawn by his right hand.

All this took place with bewildering rapidity, but if that surprise had not been mutual, the result would certainly have been different.

Those shots, rapidly as they followed each other, were not sent at random, and mingling with the spiteful explosions, blending with the shrill, fierce war-cry of the Mother Snake, came yell-s and screeches of death-agony as more than one of the hostiles reeled and fell upon the blood-sprinkled snow.

From some little distance away, then rose the wild yell of a stronger force, followed almost immediately by hoarse cries from the direction of the ranch itself. And as shots began to flash in his direction, Silverblade, with a taunting yell, wheeled and dashed away through the night, heading direct for the ranch buildings!

"Hyar they be, pards!" he shouted, imitating with marvelous fidelity the voice of Tom Dustin, for he knew that those hoarse cries could have come only from the members of the

Cross-cut Gang. "Hyar's Campbell an' his gal! Head 'em off this way!"

Then he jerked his sheet up over his head and shoulders, bending low as he ran swiftly to the right, at a sharp angle, until striking a snow-drift, into which he dove head-first, lying without motion as the feathery flakes closed over his body.

It was a risky experiment, but he tried it without hesitation, depending on its very audacity to carry him through in safety.

Although taken completely by surprise as he had been, Silverblade, in those few seconds, had swiftly solved the enigma; and to clear up all obscure points before going further, the whole truth may as well find record right here.

One of the bands of Sioux, so many of whom had taken fresh alarm at the extermination of Big Foot's band at Wounded Knee, while making for what they deemed their only refuge, the Bad Lands, had found themselves near the Campbell Ranch when the force of the blizzard spent itself.

In hopes of winning a few scalps without much risk of losing their own, together with fresh mounts and a stock of provisions, this particular band decided to steal upon the ranch, taking its occupants by surprise, when complete success would no doubt be their reward.

To make sure that no soldiers were stationed at the ranch, the main force halted at a safe distance, sending half a dozen of their number to scout and spy, then return with a full report. And it was this small band, as yet together, which had surprised and been surprised by the three fugitives.

A little clump of bushes and tall weeds had intervened; the snow deadened all footfalls; and so the two parties came fairly face to face before either suspected the proximity of others. Then, acting on their bloodthirsty instinct, the savages had sent in a hasty volley, without taking time to make sure of their aim.

The yells which came from the main force told Silverblade pretty well how matters stood in that direction, and from the startled shouts sent forth by the Cross-cut Gang, he knew that they had grown impatient of further waiting, and had either entered the house, or were on the point of doing so when that alarm broke forth.

Hoping to bring the outlaws that way, knowing that the Sioux would surely charge, he stole the voice of Tom Dustin on the chance of setting wolf and dog to tearing each other, thus granting Campbell time and opportunity for finding Marcia, and making their escape a fact.

His bold ruse succeeded even better than he dared hope for. With a fierce cheer, Cross-cut Cale led his gang to the south, and when nearly opposite where Silverblade lay buried in the snow-drift, the Sioux met them, yelling, shouting, "wild for hair!"

The dim, deceptive light was against close shooting, but more than one man fell on either side before the two bands fairly realized the actual facts of the case: that each had met rather more than they had expected.

Recoiling, it was a matter of moments which party would be first to give way in earnest, but fate willed that it should be the whites. One of the latest shots had stung Cross-cut Cale viciously, and he hoarsely cried:

"Fall back, men! Sock it to 'em, but make for the ranch! We can stand 'em off there, if—"

Doubtless some of the red-skins understood English, for a fierce yell of fiercer triumph burst from their throats, and they came in a vicious rush, shooting and being shot at in turn.

Even then the tables might have been turned, had Cross-cut Cale not temporarily lost his nerve, but he set the example of retreating, and his men were not much more backward, though still gritty enough to make a grim show of fighting, which kept the Sioux from actually closing in and crushing them by mere force of numbers.

Silverblade, his keen eyes serving him well, despite his snowy covering, lifted his head far enough above the drift to take notes; and seeing his chance, he wrapped the sheet closer around himself, crouching low and gliding through the snow, until—

A clear, quavering note came floating across the level, making itself heard in spite of the wild tumult of fight, by its very difference in quality: a note which Silverblade instantly imitated with marvelous fidelity, then running swiftly toward the hollow through which, only a few minutes earlier, the fugitives had ridden.

He had almost gained the little patch of rank weeds straight ahead, when that signal came again, and rising up, the half-blood said, softly:

"Silverblade is here, brother!"

"Thank the Lord for so much!" ejaculated the Border Beagle, as he sent his horse through

the weeds, with Harry Wilson close behind him. "Where's Campbell, Davie?"

"Where's Miss Marcia? If she's murdered, I'll—"

"They are safe, brothers: safer than our scalps will be, if we talk too loud," interposed Silverblade, with a touch of anger in his last words. "If Red-hair wants the Sioux, let him go over yonder."

"The lad's right, pardner," interposed Big Horn, with a fleeting smile as he fancied he could detect something akin to jealousy in those words. "We've got to pull foot for safer quarters, or take a share in the fight."

"Not without— Where's Campbell and Miss Marcia?" persisted the cowboy, but Silverblade sharply muttered:

"Come! They have gone on, while the Shoshone stayed back to fight for them. Now—we can go, too!"

Without waiting for an answer or to hear further objections, the half-blood strode away, keeping down in the hollow where the snow was broken by the earlier passage.

"Wait, Davie," after a brief silence called out Big Horn, whose elevation on horseback enabled him to overlook the level ground. "What's the use of walking, or doubling up, when nags are standing around idle?"

Acting on that hint, Silverblade left the hollow, and saw an Indian pony, held fast by the foot of its dead master being caught in the reins. And mounting the animal, he rode back to his friends, then led them rapidly along the trail left by Campbell and his daughter.

CHAPTER XV.

ROUNDING UP THE GANG.

By those who knew him best, Bruce Campbell was admitted to be far above the average, when it came to cool nerve and sterling courage, but on this occasion he was little better than a passive puppet.

So far as he was concerned, that surprise was complete. Before he could realize what had happened, it was pretty much all over. His horse had gone down with a suddenness that racked him in every joint, and it was purely instinct that enabled him to keep from being pinned fast by a leg. It was like one in a nightmare that he felt Silverblade snatch him from the snow, pitch him into a saddle, to send him flying away through the night with an adjuration to save his child.

So, before he could collect his scattered wits, he was a goodly distance off, his horse instinctively following in the track broken by the animal bearing Marcia. And then, when he did rally sufficiently to grip the reins, partially checking his mount, a real or fancied cry from ahead caused him to send his horse forward instead of to the rear.

"Heaven help the lad! but—my little girl comes first!" the ranchman huskily muttered, ending that brief struggle almost as soon as it had begun. "Marcia! Little daughter!"

He called as loudly as he dared, trusting to the growing tumult behind for passing unheard by other ears; but the desired answer did not come, and he spurred his horse furiously on, fearing the worst.

It was a bit of rare good luck that he kept the right course, and for doing so the horse was more to be thanked than its rider; but just as that bold sweep brought Campbell to the right trail for Barton's, his hoarse call was answered back by the glad tones of his daughter.

As it proved, Marcia's horse had been stung sharply by one of those hastily discharged shots, causing it to make a furious leap, the sudden strain of which snapped one of the reins. Marcia was nearly unseated, but managed to recover herself, only to find that she was out of sight of her friends, and unable to either check or guide her horse.

The heavy traveling helped take the wire edge off, and by soothing words and kindly touches, the frightened creature was gradually brought under subjection. Marcia, by leaning far forward, managed to secure the flying end of the broken rein, after which it was easy work to check her mount, and when Campbell gave the call that met her ears, the brave girl was mending the bridle, meaning to ride back and join her parent, let the cost be what it might.

Even now, Marcia was reluctant to press on for Barton's, without making at least an effort to assist their friends, but Bruce Campbell would listen to nothing else; as he very justly observed, one man, with a girl to hamper his arms, could only hinder, not help.

"Horton said we must press right on, regardless of them, if trouble came, and I promised him we'd do it, Marcia," he added, doggedly.

"But, the Indians!"

"We didn't count on them, of course, but their chipping in makes it all the worse. We've got to go! Only, if that boy suffers, I'll have a dozen lives to pay for his, if I have to turn scalp-hunter myself!"

That was the point which stung most sharply, now that he could look back and realize just what had taken place. He had viewed the half-blood with no great favor; he had not been far from actually scorning him, both because of his mixed blood and his slight physique. But now, why, he had handled him like a baby!

"Heaven grant he hasn't given his life for mine!" Campbell ended, telling Marcia all as they left the ranch miles behind them.

"And we are running away, leaving him to face our enemies, alone! Father, I feel worse than a heathen! I feel like—like what I've dreamed a murderer must feel!"

Bruce Campbell could appreciate her feelings fairly well, but he wisely sought to lighten, rather than darken the situation.

"They'll get off clear during the confusion, never fear, daughter!"

They had covered rather more than half the distance to their longed-for haven of refuge, when they came upon an encampment of Indian scouts, under command of Captain Taylor, of the Ninth Cavalry.

Explanations were hastily given, and when the gallant officer had won a fairly complete idea of the situation, he sent the two fugitives on toward Barton's, with a small escort, then pressed along their trail at "the double," heading for Campbell's Ranch.

Captain Taylor was out on a general scout, doing what he could to gather in the fleeing squads of Indians, scattered by that unfortunate affair at Wounded Knee. And now that a stroke of good luck had brought him a bit of work to do, he set about improving his opportunity with characteristic energy.

And so it came about that Big Horn Buck, with Silverblade and the red-haired cowboy from Campbell's, pressing rapidly along the snow-trail left by Marcia and her father, recognized the nature of that coming force, in ample time to guard against mischief arising.

Thanks to his association with the army, and his favorable standing in the estimation of General Miles and his staff, it did not take long for the Border Beagle to introduce himself and mates, after which a very few words sufficed to make the situation clear on both sides.

Their anxiety concerning Bruce Campbell and his daughter being set at rest, the three men lost no time in volunteering to guide the troop of Indian scouts to Campbell's, where there was almost the certainty of capturing the Cross-cut Gang, with a fair chance of "rounding up" the band of hostiles as well.

Long before the scouts came in sight of Campbell's, all hands knew Big Horn had prophesied correctly. There was an irregular rattle of rifle-shots, plainly betokening a close siege, and when the troop drew near enough, Captain Taylor called a brief halt to give orders which he hoped would result in bagging the entire outfit—red-skins as well as whites.

There could be no fault found with his plans, from a military point of view, yet they proved a complete failure, so far as the Sioux were concerned, on that particular occasion.

Doubtless they had keen eyes on the lookout, for, just before the troop was set in motion once more, firing abruptly ceased near the ranch, and when the Indian scouts closed their net, not a Sioux, save a few dead braves, was gathered in!

The rest had fled in hot haste, and pursuit, under the circumstances, was worse than folly.

A stern challenge came from the closed ranch, which changed to a joyful cheer when Captain Taylor replied, and Cross-cut Cale himself met that officer at the threshold, hastily explaining:

"You didn't come a bit too soon, boss! We fit our level best, but the cussed imps was crowding us mighty hard, and I reckon daylight wouldn't have caught us with thatch for our roofs! How come ye?"

"How come you to be cooped up in here, my man?" interposed the officer. "Isn't this Campbell's Ranch?"

Just as though that name was the signal, two scouts grasped each man, while the remainder stood with rifles in readiness to drop the first one foolish enough to show fight.

"But, boss!" exploded Atkins, agitatedly. "We're white, and surely you won't yank us up for defending ourselves against a bloody pack o' Injuns who—"

"Oh, come off the roof, Cross-cut!" drawled Big Horn Buck, for the first time making himself visible.

The desperado, seeing how fatally he was trapped, made a fierce effort to break away, but was flung down and firmly bound.

"Of course I can't exactly swear that you'll hang for this little job, Cale," chuckled Big Horn, when that was done, "but I'm pretty sure you'll make no further trouble in this region!"

CHAPTER XVI.

SILVERBLADE, THE PEACEMAKER.

"THAT bit of white rag don't make it come any easier, does it, Davie, lad?" softly chuckled Big Horn Buck, his gaze turning from the fluttering handkerchief to the face of his boy pard, who gave a slight start, like one roused from a day-dream, then touched up his horse and broke into a gallop which lasted for many minutes.

Just one week had elapsed since those two, Border Beagle and Silverblade the Friendly, had joined Bruce Campbell and his daughter, Marcia, at Barton's Ranch, after the "round-up" of the Cross-cut Gang.

Those seven days had wrought a great alteration in the half-blood. They had restored his strength, mental as well as physical, leaving him in far better trim than he had been at any time since first led from "the white man's road" to wander after a false Messiah. But that was not the only change those comparatively peaceful days had wrought.

Bruce Campbell had warmly welcomed the youth who had so gallantly saved his life at the imminent risk of his own, and Marcia, like a dutiful daughter, followed the example thus set for her. And, while almost rudely denying that thanks were his due, Silverblade felt his self-imposed frost slowly beginning to melt away.

Big Horn Buck, who kept close in covert watch, was shrewd enough to let nature have its own way, and took it all as a matter of course that the reformed ghost-dancer should, in a measure, return to the garb better suiting his white blood. And then—each succeeding day did its own part of the work, and when the two men decided to resume their journey to the north, Bruce Campbell had promised to take a trip up to that region when spring came, to see if he would not like it better as a stock-grower, among the peaceful tribes, than where he had located, near the Sioux reservations.

And Marcia, too, whispered many a kindly message for Enola, David's sister. And there were tears in her bright blue eyes as she stood waving that 'kerchief to the two men who drew rein at the last point of view, before plunging into the snowy waste which stretched before them.

Big Horn Buck, however, contented himself with the single remark with which this final chapter is opened. He was shrewd enough to see that silence was wisest, and he let Silverblade's own thoughts do his work for him. But, when the two pards went into a snug camp that night, and supper was dispatched, the Border Beagle turned his tongue free.

"Well, lad, you wanted to hoot me down, when I first told you how I vowed to Little Sure Shot I'd bring her brother back to her, *a man once more!* How does it strike you, now?"

There was no immediate reply. The half-blood sat gazing intently into the fire, his face grave, his dark eyes soft, yet very earnest. On his face rested a shadow, but it was altogether different from the one he wore after his belief in the Indian Messiah was so rudely brushed away.

"You told me, then, that Davie was dead; that you were Silverblade; that you were *all* red, *all* Indian! You believed it, too, I'll give you full credit for so much, pardner! But—*how is it now?*"

"You were right, brother," came the slow, grave response, though those eyes never varied from their fixed gaze at the glowing coals.

"Lying tongues poured poison into my ears, and lying dreams turned my brain crooked. That poison tasted sweeter than pure honey, at first, and those dreams were like sweet songs from heaven. If they had only lasted!"

"Being all lies, they couldn't last, Davie."

"Big Horn is right: being lies, the truth had to come on top. But—it tore the heart nearly out of my breast—it crushed the life out of my brain when I knew—even now it turns me sick and dizzy to look back!"

"Then look forward, Davie!" in brisk, cheery tones. "There comes a time when every man must play the dupe or fool, and you're lucky to have passed your trial so early. Now—give your real heart and brain a fair show, Davie, and you'll be all the better man for what has gone by. *I know,* for I had to serve my time—once!"

"It may be as my brother says," with a long

breath. "If he was right in one thing, he may be right in this, as well. And so—my good, kind, true-hearted brother—listen!"

"Silverblade is gone! He may be only sleeping, he may be dead, never more to waken in this world. If dead, let his follies be buried in the same grave. If he ever wakens in this life, he will not be the Ghost Dancer, nor the Hostile; he will be Silverblade, the Peacemaker!"

"That's a big improvement over the other titles, lad, but I prefer the name your good father gave you to all others!"

As by a common impulse, the two pards rose to their feet, their hands coming together in a warm grasp, their eyes meeting fully, frankly, without disguise or evasion. And then the younger man spoke:

"You shall have your wish, brother! I am David Woodbridge now! I am going home to my people, a better man by far than when I left them, to follow a lying vision. And, brother, all this I owe to *you!*"

"Not to me, but to the prayers sent after their wanderer by your honest father, your loving sister, Davie, lad!"

"You omit my mother's name," with a faint smile. "I understand. Better far than you can, brother. Weenamoo is all Indian, but she is my mother, and I am her idol. I know that, and I know, too, that while she may still cherish her dreams, she will never try to send me along a path my new light warns me is wrong—for me, not wrong for her!"

"Yes, I am going home! I hope to remain there, in peace and what happiness my past errors leave room for. But—and you know this, brother, fully as well as I do—there is still great danger of a still worse outbreak in the spring. Unless the Sioux are treated with more humanity—I don't go so far as to say *honesty*—there is sure to be fresh trouble when grass sprouts. If it is to be so, then Silverblade will waken, and give his life to preaching peace among all men!"

"You're right about the chances for fresh trouble, Davie, lad, but long before that day comes 'round, I'm hoping you'll have other cares and other hopes to cherish."

"What hopes can I have, better or nobler than to serve my mother's people?" asked David, but with his lids suddenly vailing his eyes.

"Well, what's the matter with serving your mother's son, for a change, lad?" chuckled Big Horn; then seriously adding: "For, Davie, boy, it rests with you, whether or no Bruce Campbell ever locates up in your section. And, Davie, it'll be your own fault if you don't marry Marcia Campbell—so there!"

There is not much more which can properly be said concerning the characters which have figured in this brief series, for at this writing (March 30, '91), it is impossible to even guess whether those dark forebodings of renewed trouble among the Sioux when "grass comes," which many besides Silverblade and Big Horn Buck have entertained, are to be fully realized.

So, too, it is yet too early to definitely dispose of either of the two pards, so far as their future is concerned; but a fairly plausible guess may be offered before bidding them a last farewell.

Big Horn Buck, the Border Beagle, has already coaxed fair Mary Dancer to "name the day." They will be married "when the grass comes," if everything goes well with them.

Little Sure Shot—Enola Woodbridge, David's sister—will make Max Donaldson happy at about the same date, and, of course, will be just as near heaven as that handsome cowboy!

Bruce Campbell, thanks to the unusual mild weather which has marked the past month or two, has already taken a "prospecting trip" into North Dakota, and expresses himself well pleased with the location pointed out to him by Luke Woodbridge, adjoining the big ranch which the ex-fur-trader owns.

As for David Woodbridge—"Silverblade" no longer, save to his Indian mother—he had no time to spend exploring locations for a stock ranch.

Why so?

Well, Marcia Campbell accompanied her father, and what with her demands on his time, with "Little Sure Shot" aiding and abetting the golden-haired lassie, David had little leisure for aught else. And, if it may be believed, he actually seemed to enjoy being a "gallant'squire of fair dames!"

Whether or no the prediction made by Big Horn Buck will ever come to pass, can only be surmised; but the writer, for one, sincerely hopes it may turn out to be a truthful prophecy.

THE END.

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- 379 Nahob Ned; or, The Secret of Slab City.
- 382 Cool Kit, the King of Kids; or, A Villain's Vengeance.
- 385 Yreka Jim's Joker; or, The Rivals of Red Nose.
- 389 Bleyce Ben; or, The Lion of Lightning Lode.
- 394 Yreka Jim of Yuba Dam.
- 400 Wrinkles, the Night-Watch Detective.
- 416 High Hat Harry, the Base Ball Detective.
- 426 Sam Sibbles, the Beggar-Boy Detective.
- 434 Jim Beak and Pal, Private Detectives.
- 438 Santa Fe Sal, the Slasher.
- 466 SealSkin Sam, the Sparkler.

BY T. C. HARBAUGH.

- 28 Nick o' the Night; or, The Boy Spy of '76.
- 37 The Hidden Lodge; or, The Little Hunter.
- 47 Nightingale Nut; or, The Forest Captain.
- 48 Dandy Jack; or, The Outlaws of the Oregon Trail.
- 82 Kit Harefoot the Wood-Hawk.
- 94 Midnight Jack; or, The Boy Trapper.
- 106 Old Frosty, the Guide; or, The White Queen.
- 128 Klowa Charley, the White Mustanger.
- 189 Judge Lynch Jr.; or, The Boy Vigilante.
- 155 Gold Trigger, the Spur; or, The Girl Avenger.
- 169 Tornado Tom; or, Injin Jack From Red Core.
- 188 Ned Temple, the Border Boy.
- 198 Arkansas; or, The Queen of Fate's Revenge.
- 207 Navajo Nick; or, The Boy Gold Hunter.
- 215 Captain Bullet; or, Little Tooknot's Crusade.
- 231 Plucky Phil; or, Ross, the Ro Jezebel.
- 241 Bill Bravo; or, The Roughs of the Rockies.
- 255 Captain Apoli; or, The King-Pin of Bowie.
- 267 The Buckskin Detective.
- 279 Old Winch; or, The Buckskin Desperadoes.
- 294 Dynamite Dan; or, The Bowie Blade of Cochetops.
- 302 The Mountain Detective; or, The Trigger Bar Bally.
- 316 Old Ellipse, Trump Card of Arizona.
- 326 The Ten Pards; or, The Terror of Take-Notice.
- 336 Big Benson; or, The Queen of the Lasso.
- 345 Pittless Matt; or, Red Thunderhill's Secret.
- 356 Cool 'em and 'em'; or, The Terrible Six.
- 366 Velvet Foot, the Indian Detective.
- 386 Captain Cutlass; or, The Buccaneer's Girl Foe.
- 396 Rough Rob; or, The Twin Champions of Blue Blazes.
- 411 The Silken Lasso; or, The Rose of Ranch Robin.
- 418 Felix Fox, the Boy Spotter.
- 425 Texas Trump, the Border Rattler.
- 436 Phil Flash, the New York Fox.
- 445 The City Vampires; or, Red Rolfe's Pigeon.
- 461 One Against Fifty; or, The Last Man of Keno Bar.
- 470 The Boy Shadow; or, Felix Fox's Hunt.
- 477 The Excisor Sport; or, The Washington Spotter.
- 499 Single Sight, the One-Eyed Sport.
- 502 Branded Ben, the Night Ferret.
- 512 Dodger Dick, the Wharf-Spy Detective.
- 521 Dodger Dick's Best Dodge.
- 528 Fox and Falcon, the Bowery Shadows.
- 538 Dodger Dick, the Dock Ferret.
- 548 Dodger Dick's Double; or, The Rival Boy Detectives.
- 553 Dodger Dick's Desperate Case.
- 563 Dodger Dick, the Boy Videoc.
- 573 The Two Shadows.
- 582 Dodger Dick's Drop.
- 594 Little Lon, the Street-Singer Detective.
- 610 Old Skinner, the Gold Shark; or, Tony Sharp on Guard.
- 626 The Champion Pards.
- 637 Dick Doan, the Dock Boy Detective.
- 645 Kit, the Pavement Sharp.
- 658 Billy Bantam, the Boy Beagle.
- 671 Jersey Jed, the Boy Hustler; or, Shadowing the Shadower.
- 685 Happy Hugh, the Boy Musician Detective.
- 701 Photograph Fred, the Camera Sharp.
- 715 Wide Awake Len, the Quaker City Ferret.
- 732 Daisy Dell, the Pavement Detective; or, Trapping Big Game.

BY WM. G. PATTEN.

- 489 The Diamond Sport; or, The Double Face of Bed Rock.
- 519 Captain Mystery; or, Five in One.
- 561 Daisy Dare, the Sport from Denver.
- 587 Old Bombshell, the Ranger Detective.
- 604 Iron Fern, the Man of Fire.
- 619 The Boy Tramp Detective; or, The Double Grip Witness.
- 629 Violet Vane, the Velvet Sport.
- 641 Dismal Dave's Dandy Yard.
- 651 Bound Boy Frank, the Young Amateur Detective.
- 668 Violet Vane's Victory.
- 682 Wild Vulcan, the Lone-Range Rider.
- 698 Violet and Daisy, the Posy Parlor.
- 705 Violet Vane's Vow; or, The Crafty Detective's Craft.
- 714 Old Misery, the Man from Missouri.
- 724 Violet Vane's Vengeance.
- 730 Violet Vane's Verdict.
- 741 Violet Vane, the Ventriloquist Videoc.

BY COLONEL PRENTISS INGRAHAM.

- 7 The Flying Yankee; or, The Ocean Outcast.
- 17 Ralph Roy, the Boy Buccaneer; or, The Fugitive Yacht.
- 24 Diamond Dirk; or, The Mystery of the Yellowstone.
- 62 The Shadow Ship; or, The Rival Lieutenant.
- 75 The Boy Snelist; or, The Cruise of the Sea-Wolf.
- 102 Dick Dead-Eye, the Boy Smuggler.
- 111 The Sea-Devil; or, The Midshipman's Legacy.
- 116 The Hussar Captain; or, The Hermit of Hell Gate.
- 197 Little Grit; or, Bessie, the Stock-Tender's Daughter.
- 204 Gold Plume; or, Buffalo Bill, the Pony Express Rider.
- 216 Bison Bill, the Prince of the Reins; or, Buffalo Bill's Pluck.
- 222 Grit, the Brave Sport; or, The Woman Trailer.
- 229 Crimson Kate; or, The Cowboy's Triumph.
- 237 Lone Star, the Cowboy Captain.
- 245 Merle, the Middy; or, The Freelance Heir.
- 250 The Midshipman Mutineer; or, Brandt, the Buccaneer.
- 264 The Floating Feather; or, Merle Monte's Treasure.
- 269 The Gold Ship; or, Merle, the Condemned.
- 276 Merle Monte's Ordeal; or, "The Gold Ship" Chase.
- 280 Merle Monte's Fate; or, Pearl, the Pirate's Bride.
- 284 The Sea Marauder; or, Merle Monte's Pledge.
- 287 Billy Blue-Eyes, the Boy Rover of the Rio Grande.
- 304 The Dead Shot Dandy; or, Bento, the Boy Bugler.
- 308 Keno Kit; or, Dead Shot Dandy's Double.
- 314 The Mysterious Marauder; or, The Boy Bugler's Trail.
- 377 Bonodel, the Boy Rover; or, The Flagless Schooner.
- 383 The Indian Pilot; or, The Search for Pirate Island.
- 398 Warpath Will, the Boy Phantom.
- 402 Isidor, the Young Conspirator; or, The Fatal League.
- 407 The Boy Insurgent; or, The Cuban Vendetta.
- 412 The Wild Yachtsman; or, The War-Cloud's Cruise.
- 429 Duncan Dare, the Boy Refugee.
- 433 A Cabin Boy's Luck; or, The Corsair.
- 437 The Sea Raider.
- 441 The Ocean Firefly; or, A Middy's Vengeance.
- 446 Haphazard Harry; or, The Scapgrace of the Sea.
- 450 Wizard Will; or, The Boy Ferret of New York.
- 454 Wizard Will's Street Scouts.
- 462 The Born Guide; or, The Sailor Boy Wanderer.
- 468 Neptune Ned; or, The Boy Conster.
- 474 Flora; or, Wizard Will's Vigabond Pard.
- 483 Ferrets Afloat; or, Wizard Will's Last Case.
- 487 Nevada Ned, the Revolver Ranger.
- 495 Arizona Joe, the Boy Pard of Texas Jack.
- 497 Buck Taylor, King of the Cowboys.
- 503 The Royal Middy; or, The Shark and the Sea Cat.
- 507 The Hunted Midshipman.
- 511 The Outlawed Middy.
- 520 Buckskin Bill, the Comanche Shadow.
- 525 Brothers in Buckskin.
- 530 The Buckskin Bowers.
- 535 The Buckskin Rovers.
- 540 Captain Ku-Klux, the Marauder of the Rio.
- 545 Lieutenant Leo, the Son of Lafitte.
- 550 Lafitte's Legacy; or, The Avenging Son.
- 555 The Creole Corsair.
- 560 Pawnee Bill, the Prairie Shadower.
- 565 Kent Kingdom, the Card King.
- 570 Camille, the Card Queen.
- 575 The Surgeon-Scout Detective.
- 580 The Outcast Cadet; or, The False Detective.
- 586 The Buckskin Avenger.
- 591 Delmonte, the Young Sea Rover.
- 597 The Young Texan Detective.
- 602 The Varabond of the Mines.
- 607 The Rover Detective; or, Keno Kit's Champions.
- 617 Ralph, the Dead-Shot Scout; or, The Rio Raiders.
- 644 The Hercules Highwayman.
- 650 Butterfly Billy, the Pony Rider Detective; or, Buffalo Bill's Boy Pard.
- 656 Butterfly Billy's Man Hunt.
- 662 Butterfly Billy's Bonanza.
- 668 The Buccaneer Midshipman.
- 674 The Wizard Sailor; or, Red Ralph, the Rover.
- 679 The Sea Shadower; or, The Freebooter's Legacy.
- 686 Orlando, the Ocean Free Flag; or, The Tarnished Name.
- 692 The Rival Sharps; or, Redfern, the Secret Service Scout.
- 697 The Scarlet Sombrero; or, The Sharp from Texas.
- 702 Blue Jacket Bill; or, The Red Hat Rangers' Red Hot Rackets.
- 707 The Red Sombrero Rangers; or, Redfern's Last Trail.
- 718 Carl, the Mad Cowboy; or, The Lariat Queen.
- 719 Pawnee Bill's Pledge; or, The Cowboy Kidnapper.
- 725 Daring Dick, Pawnee Bill's Pard; or, The Red Cavalry Raid.
- 731 Ruth Redmond, the Comanche's Captive.

BY BUFFALO BILL (Hon. Wm. F. Cody).

- 8 Kansas King; or, The Red Right Hand.
- 19 The Phantom Spy; or, The Pilot of the Prairie.
- 55 Deadly-Eye, the Unknown Scout.
- 68 Border Robin Hood; or, The Prairie Rover.
- 188 Fancy Frank of Colorado; or, The Trapper's Trust.

LATEST AND NEW ISSUES.

- 742 Billy Winks, the Bell Boy Detective; or, Breaking the Meshes of the Golden Coil. By T. C. Harbaugh.
- 743 Buck Taylor's Boys; or, The Red Riders of the Rio Grande. By Col. Prentiss Ingraham.
- 744 Dick of the Docks, the Night-Watch; or, The Water-Wall's Dead Past. By Jo Pierce.
- 745 Kansas Jim, the Cross-Cut Detective; or, The Maidens of the Range. By Lieut. A. K. Sims.
- 746 Qinet Jack, the Secret Service Spy; or, Too Much for Red Leary. By Dan Dunning, (of the Secret Service Corps).
- 747 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Double; or, The Tandem Team of Teddy's Tailings. By Edward L. Wheeler.
- 748 Silverblade, the Friendly; or, The Border Beagle's Boy Pard. By Jos. E. Badger, Jr.
- 749 Dashing Charlie, the Young Scalp-Taker; or, The Kentucky Tenderfoot's First Trial. By Col. Prentiss Ingraham.
- 750 Violet Vane, the Vanquisher; or, The Life Struggle at Shanty City. By Wm. G. Patten.
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